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KEITH STAGGERED, AS ONE SMITTEN BY A SUDDEN BLOW.

MRS. DAWSON'S LODGINGS.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

SIR GERALD ANSTRUTHER was a baronet of old family and large fortune, the cheeriest companion, the pleasantest host, that you could have met with within fifty miles, but he was a bachelor.

It had puzzled a great many people to guess the reason he had avoided matrimony, since he was a man of eminently domestic tastes and had a decided penchant for womankind.

The simple truth of the matter was his wealth and honours had not come to him till he was hard on fifty. The painful restrictions of genteel poverty had pressed on him so severely up till then that he had been quite unable to afford a wife. At forty-seven he decided he was too old.

"I daresay there were plenty of girls who would have accepted me," he remarked, simply, to his nephew one winter's night when they sat talking over their wine, and he had been betrayed into speaking of the past, "that is, would have accepted the name of Lady Anstruther; but there wasn't one of 'em would have loved me. I had no fancy for buying a wife, and so you see I kept single. You mother made me very happy while she was alive, and I think I'm pretty nearly as fond of you, Keith, as though you'd been born my own son. I haven't had any of the dreariness and neglect which is supposed to encompass forlorn bachelors. And, take it altogether, my boy, I'm pretty well satisfied with what my sixty years have brought me."

The Baronet made this speech when he had enjoyed his honours some thirteen years, and his gentle sister had been dead about half that time.

Lucy Anstruther had married a young officer, who left her a widow early.

She had been very thankful for a home with

her brother, and a start in life for her son, even though Gerald prefaced his invitation with a warning that his nephew Keith must not regard himself as his heir.

To do Keith Rosalind justice, he never had counted on inheriting his uncle's fortune, though, as Sir Gerald had no other relation, he might well have done so.

The entail on the Anstruther estates ended with Sir Gerald. He was perfectly free to leave his property as he would.

It had come to him unexpectedly from a distant cousin, who had been powerless to will away a penny of the revenues or income of the estates.

Sir Gerald, on the contrary, could have bequeathed the whole to found an asylum for the insane, and no one could have said him nay.

Keith was a boy at school when his mother accepted her brother's invitation to preside over his home. He was seven-and-twenty now—a handsome, thoughtful-looking man, with dark eyes and clearly-cut, regular features.

Kelth was a barrister by profession, and had been duly called to the Bar, but he was not likely to see any briefs for some years to come. However, as he enjoyed free quarters at his uncle's house, and a very liberal allowance from the Baronet to supplement his slender patrimony, his briefless state hardly caused him any serious inconvenience.

"I made my will yesterday, Kelth," said Sir Gerald, slowly, as though anxious to impress his nephew with the importance of the subject. "I expect a great many people think you will be my heir, but—there were other claims on me. Fortunately, the baronetcy becomes extinct, so you won't be troubled by a mere empty title."

Kelth looked up thoughtfully. He had been told again and again he would not inherit his uncle's wealth, and, to do him justice, he was not mercenary, but he possessed his full share of curiosity.

He knew Sir Gerald had not another relation but himself, and so it did puzzle him a little to guess what "claims" there could possibly be on the Baronet.

He had once upon a time speculated as to the chances of his uncle having contracted an early improvident marriage, and quarrelled with his wife, but Sir Gerald's latest confidence seemed to contradict even the idea of such a thing.

His uncle watched him curiously. He did not like the young man's silence.

"You're no right to think yourself aggrieved, Kelth. I always told your mother my intentions."

Kelth brought his hand down on the table with a bang.

He was annoyed, not at his uncle's communication, but at the suggestion he felt aggrieved.

"If you gave away every shilling you possessed, Sir Gerald, I should have no right to complain. I owe you years of a kind, pleasant home, a good education, and a fair start in my profession. I assure you I never expected more."

Sir Gerald fidgeted with his wine-glass.

"I should like to have left you all I had, I should, indeed, Kelth, but you see my word's gone. I've been thinking over it a lot lately, and I believe I see a way by which you may yet reign here when I am gone."

"You'll live another thirty years yet, I hope, sir," said Rositur, cheerfully. "You come of a race given to making old bones."

"Perhaps! But I'm sixty turned, and it was better to see to things. I should like to tell you all about it, Kelth, and why I've left my property away from you."

Mr. Rositur put up his hands in despair.

"I will listen to anything in the world, but please, uncle, let that subject drop."

The story was a very simple one, and it had an air of pathos in it. More than twenty years before, when Gerald Anstruther was a mere clerk at two hundred a year, and working tolerably hard to enjoy that, he had a friend whom he loved as a brother. His sister Lucy was married, and gone abroad with her husband. He was almost alone in the world, and he clung to George Dugdale with all the tenacity of a heart not given to pour itself out in many affections.

Mr. Dugdale received the offer of a post abroad, and being a married man accepted the chance of advancement eagerly. There was a sad parting between the friends, and strong up to real emotion, Gerald Anstruther took a solemn oath that if he died unmarried he would leave all he possessed to his friend's children.

It was a strange oath, but at that time many lives stood between him and the Anstruther property. It was not to be expected he could have more than a few hundreds—if so much—to leave. George Dugdale had been to him dearer than a brother. He was a dreamy, visionary man, much given to gloomy forebodings, and had been bawling in Gerald's hearing the poverty which would certainly be his children's lot. He had two already, and a third expected.

He went to America with his wife and children. Little more than a year later Mrs. Dugdale wrote to tell Gerald Anstruther of her husband's

death. She had never been a favourite with him, and was quite in ignorance of his vow, and also of the fact that, poor though he was at present, he belonged to a rich and powerful family. Her letter was essentially of the kind called "begging." She enclosed a few lines from her husband written on his death-bed, and hinted very plainly a five-pound note would be more acceptable than the most fervent condolences.

Anstruther unfasted the little note penned by his friend's hand. It seemed to him almost a message from the grave. It was very short, and very simple, only saying that the little boy had died on the voyage out, the baby was born dead, so that there was but one child left on the mother's hands, and for her George Dugdale implored his friend's care—if ever she came to England, would Gerald be kind to her; when his own time came to die would he remember his promise, and try to provide for his godchild's future.

"She must be twenty, turned, by this time," said Sir Gerald, looking at his nephew rather helplessly. "I declare I never thought how the years were running on until I came to make my will, and then this plan occurred to me. I really think, Kelth, it is quite an inspiration."

"You haven't told me what it is yet," objected Kelth, who did not quite like the eagerness of his uncle's tone.

"Well, you see, I am bound to leave Geraldine Dugdale (they called her after me) all I have. Cameron tried to make me think the old oath was not binding on me, but—"

"Of course it is binding," said Kelth, seeing the old man waited for some reply from him.

"I was sure you would say so. Well, Kelth, Cameron and I both think it is high time Geraldine came back to England and learned a little of the position she will have to fill. He is going to make all inquiries, and he thinks she may be discovered in three months."

"I hope she may."

"And, Kelth," went on Sir Gerald, a little uncomfortably, "she is sure to be a nice girl; her father was the noblest man I ever met."

"And her mother?"

"Her mother was odious!" confessed Sir Gerald; "but, of course, she won't take after her."

"After being under her sole influence for so long, I should think it probable."

"I believe you are trying to annoy me, Kelth."

"Not in the least, uncle. Well, in three months' time you think Miss Dugdale may be found? I suppose you will install her at once as the heiress of Anstruther Park?"

"She is quite young, Kelth," said the baronet, speaking very fast, and without a single stop, as though he were afraid of interruption, "not more than two-and-twenty at the most; and you know, it is high time you married; and five years is just the right difference between husband and wife. You are very dear to me, Kelth, I can't bear the idea of your being a poor man, and this plan settles everything."

"What plan, uncle?"

Sir Gerald groaned at Kelth's obtuseness.

"Marry Geraldine Dugdale, and you and she can reign together at Anstruther. She must be a nice girl, Kelth; and, really, it's time you thought about settling."

Kelth smiled.

"You have the kindest heart in the world, sir, and I'd do a great deal to please you; but I can't agree to this, even for you."

"Why not?"

"I have no particular wish to marry at all, and I am old-fashioned. I believe in love."

"Why shouldn't you fall in love with Geraldine?"

"Love doesn't come to order."

"You might try."

Kelth had hard work not to laugh, his uncle's tone was so disconsolate.

"Unfortunately I have a great objection to heiresses, sir. I could never bring myself to marry any woman richer than myself; and I don't quite like what you tell me of Mrs. Dugdale."

"Kelth, you are behaving abominably!" said the baronet, testily.

"Very likely the young lady is married already," suggested his graceless nephew. "I believe they do such things early in America."

"Will you promise me to give the matter your careful consideration?"

Kelth shook his head.

"I can't. My mind is quite made up. The heiress is quite safe from all annoyance from me. I assure you, sir, I never counted on your wealth. I shall never pose as an injured rival before Miss Dugdale."

In vain Sir Gerald attempted to move him. The young barrister kept perfectly firm.

Then Sir Gerald, who for years had never had a whim ungratified, grew positively angry.

He raged and stormed; finally he ventured so far as to reproach Kelth for his ingratitude, and to throw past favours in his teeth.

The next moment he regretted the step, for Kelth Rositur was desperately proud.

There was no quarrel. He did not even seem out of temper. He only said that if his uncle could remind him of his benefits, it was high time they should cease.

He would move into lodgings that very day, and leave Sir Gerald's house free for its future mistress.

In vain the baronet expostulated.

A little reflection showed Kelth his resolve, though taken in pique, was really prudent.

"The sooner I leave off going through the world under false pretences, uncle, the better for me. I really am a poor man, and it's time people knew it. I have a hundred a-year of my own, I can pick up a little by my pen. I daresay I shall manage to make both ends meet."

"Of course I shall continue your allowance even if you persist in deserting me."

"I am not deserting you, uncle. I will come to you at any time you need me; only I have my way to fight in the future, and I think it is time I began the battle."

"You won't leave to-night?" pleaded Sir Gerald.

"I'll stay another week or so. Sir, shall I give you a word of advice? In your place I should go to America myself."

"Good gracious! What for?"

"Because you are the person most interested. No clerk whom Cameron sent could have the matter so much at heart as yourself. You would be able to recognise Mrs. Dugdale, and explain your intentions to her, and perhaps escort your protégée to England."

Sir Gerald looked round his handsome dining-room which he had filled with home comforts. He gave a sigh of regret.

"I believe you're right, Kelth; and there's another thing. I should be moped to death here without you, and maybe all the world would say we had quarrelled."

"I don't mind what people say, but if you really think you should miss me that is another argument in favour of the American journey."

His advice was taken. There was not the slightest suspicion of any breach between Sir Gerald and his nephew.

The baronet went to America very soon; even Mr. Cameron never suspected, when a week later he heard Mr. Rositur was settling in bachelor lodgings, that it was anything more than a temporary arrangement for the time of his uncle's absence.

"You'd better come and stay with us till you find quarters to suit you," he said, genially. "I can't tell you, Mr. Rositur, how concerned I am at your uncle's strange freak."

Kelth accepted the invitation for a week and said, thoughtfully, speaking of Sir Gerald,—

"I only hope he won't be taken in. You see, Mr. Cameron, my uncle in some things is as simple as a child. He is sure to tell his errand to America to every one he meets, and may have a dozen young ladies claiming to be his friend's child."

Mr. Cameron groaned.

"Well, the true Miss Dugdale will give you as much trouble as a false one. It's ten to one she's married in a humble rank of life, and never expected so much as a bank-note from her father's old comrade. Sir Gerald says he must

keep his oath, but to my mind the keeping of it's just madness and a real injustice to you."

Keith shook his head.

"I expect Sir Gerald will have a good deal of trouble about it, but I think he's right to keep his word. There's something to my mind very noble in a man's going to so much trouble just to redeem a promise no one could make him fulfil—it's my idea of honour."

"And the nobility's at your cost. You're much too romantic for this work-a-day world, Mr. Rosseter; you'll find it doesn't pay."

Keith looked at his old friend with a strangely earnest expression in his eyes.

"I think it's just in this work-a-day world one needs a romance, Mr. Cameron. Rich folks have plenty of pleasant facts. Poor ones wouldn't have much bright to think about if they didn't weave a thread of romance into their sordid lives."

"And you're a barrister!"

"Yes—shall you think me too mad even to give me a brief, Mr. Cameron?"

"Oh, come, Sir Gerald will make you a handsome allowance even if he finds the girl. No need for you to work."

"Every need!" said Keith, slowly. "I shall never take another penny of allowance from my uncle. The moment I heard of his promise to George Dagdale I made up my mind; for the future, I must stand alone!"

"Then you must give up romance," observed Mr. Cameron, "for it doesn't pay."

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Dawson lived in Camden Town, and made a very uncertain living by letting lodgings. There were times when the "card" remained in her window for weeks together, while the tradespeople grew impatient, and the widow hopeless; but just at the eleventh hour when things looked at their lowest ebb, a tenant would turn up, and the Dawson family once more succeeded in that truly difficult task of keeping their heads above water.

Stock's terrace was a very respectable street, frightfully dull, and depressingly quiet; but though most of the hundred odd houses let lodgings, it was seldom any swindler or bad character took up his quarters there; the terrace was much affected by city clerks and daily governesses.

The dingy, semi-detached houses, and the strip of faded grass-plat before the door, known as "front garden," seemed to have a special attraction for these.

No one in the terrace was very rich. Most of the householders, indeed, had to make spasmodic efforts to get together their quarter's rent, but for all that a midnight flitting, or a visit from the sheriff's officer, was quite unknown there.

It was a November day. The sky had that peculiarly leaden hue known to experienced eyes as the forerunner of a fog. It was bitterly cold, but there was a heavy feeling in the air, making one feel dull and listless.

Mrs. Dawson and her eldest daughter looked both, but the atmosphere had very little to do with their appearance.

It was three months turned since the last lodger had departed. No one had even gone so far as to inquire the terms. Mrs. Dawson had advertised again and again. She had a card, recommending her apartments, displayed at the local stationer's, and yet no one came, and, meanwhile, seven children had to be fed and clothed. The expenses went on just the same, and it really seemed to Mrs. Dawson and Nina that unless help—that is to say a lodger—came soon, they should all be in the workhouse.

They were having a desperate consultation as to ways and means, for the mother had changed her last half-crown. The baker's man had just refused to continue the supply of bread, and, taken altogether, their circumstances looked even more deplorable than the weather.

Mrs. Dawson had been a pretty woman once, and she still retained sufficient good looks to make one wonder what she had been like before

trouble lined her face and streaked her hair with grey.

Sorrow ages early; she was not much past forty, and yet seemed quite elderly. Nina was not in the least like her. Her mother's comeliness had been in the pink and white dairy-maid style of prettiness. The daughter's face, though pale and sad, had a refinement and delicacy which looked out of place in Stock's terrace. Whatever Nina Dawson put on suited her. Her features were too irregular for beauty, but there was a charm in her dark blue eyes and thick, long black lashes—a something about the wavy brown hair and broad open forehead which won upon people strangely.

The rough servant girl who waited upon the Dawsons would have given warning long ago, only she couldn't bear to leave Miss Nina.

The landlord had more patience with Mrs. Dawson than any of his other tenants, because her daughter's face touched him and made him pitiful.

But the widow herself, strange to say, had no great affection for the slight graceful girl who was so useful to her.

There were five years between Nina and her brother Tom, who was the mother's darling. Tom was away at sea, but any one of the six little girls who came after him was dearer to Mrs. Dawson than Nina.

There were times when she almost hated her first-born, who had never given her an hour's sorrow in her life.

Nina was pretty well used to it by this time. Her father had been different. A kind, warm-hearted man, who was always going to make a fortune and yet had never done it, who flew into a passion one minute and repented almost to tears the next. A very weak character, no doubt, but Nina had loved him dearly, and had sorrowed bitterly for his loss.

She never quite understood what he did of. She was the only one of the children old enough to remember that dreary time. She was just turned twelve, and Tom, a little mite of seven, when Mr. Dawson was taken ill, and they were sent away to somewhere in the country. They stayed three months, and then an old lady with a kind face came to fetch them home, and said they would never see papa again, and they must be good children and never mention him to their poor mamma.

When they got home they found twin babies had arrived, and their mother looked ten years older.

She would never mention her husband's name or let the children. Some one—Nina fancied it was the kind old lady—paid all the bills, and got No. 47, Stock's terrace, ready for them, and there they had lived ever since.

The first few years had not been so difficult; a "friend" (again Nina's thoughts went to the old lady) paid the rent, and sent them handsome presents, even paying all the expenses of getting Tom into the merchant service; but death had removed this help, and for the last two years the Dawsons had depended entirely on their lodgers, and a tiny annuity of fifty pounds a-year which her father had left the widow.

Poor Nina thought of plans till her head ached. Tom was thousands of miles away. His earnings for years would keep only himself. Nina would gladly have gone out as a governess, but in that case if lodgers had come, who would have seen to their comfort? The rough servant girl needed constant supervision.

The next sister to Nina was what her mother called "sensitive," but the neighbours in plainer language styled "half-witted." After her came a cripple. The four younger ones were sharp enough, but Alice was only just turned twelve, Georgina eleven, and the twins ten. The mother's time all went in attending to the two afflicted ones. If Nina went out as a governess all hope of lodgers was at an end.

"Why do you sit there like a statue?" demanded Mrs. Dawson; she was very much out of temper, and never spared Nina on such occasions. "Why don't you think of some way out of our trouble?"

"We might send away Betsy," suggested Nina, a little hopelessly. "I darsay if you let

Alice and the children help I could manage to do this work."

"I won't hear of such a thing! My children shall not be turned into drudges. I wonder you dare to suggest it, Nina!"

Nina might have suggested she was one of the children herself, but she knew by experience it was no use arguing with her mother.

"Could you write to anyone?" she asked, timidly. "Is there any one who would lend us a little money?"

"No one," said Mrs. Dawson, tartly. "Poor people don't make friends, child!"

The change from the half-crown which Betsy had just brought in lay on the table, two silver coins and a few coppers. Nina glanced sadly at the little heap. It would barely provide their food for the day, since every crumb must be paid for; what was to become of them on the morrow?

She looked round the room.

"Could we sell something?" she suggested timidly. "I know you won't like the idea, mamma, but I can't think of anything else."

"There's those trinkets of yours," replied her mother, quietly. "You can sell them if you like."

"My gold necklace!" there was just a touch of regret in the girl's voice. It had been given her years before by the father she missed so much. "Perhaps I had better. There seems no help for it."

Mrs. Dawson brightened perceptibly.

"I told Charlie it was an absurd thing to buy for a child of five," she said, mentioning her husband's name to Nina for the first time since his death, "but he was set on it. You never saw such a fuss as he made over you. You'd better put your things on and go to Regent-street. If you take it to the shop where it was bought they'll give you a fair price for it."

"Shall I take the children with me?"

"You have no sense!" retorted Mrs. Dawson, amiably. "Can't you see there's a fog coming on? I'll give you twopence, then you can take a bus to Charing-cross; it's no distance after that."

Nina came downstairs dressed in her well-worn blue serge and thin cloth jacket. She had the necklace in a little reticule on her arm. Mrs. Dawson handed her twopence rather grudgingly, and she set out.

She took the omnibus to Charing-cross, and soon found the jeweller's shop. The master, a pleasant, kindly-spoken man, who recognised a lady, even in shabby garments, examined the necklace civilly, and told her it had originally cost six or seven pounds, but she was not likely to obtain more than half that sum, as the pattern was quite out of fashion. He himself never purchased second-hand articles, but he would give her a line of introduction to a person in the Strand who dealt in such things if she liked. It was coming on very foggy, he would advise her to take a cab.

Poor Nina! She could not tell the prosperous shopkeeper she was penniless, she only thanked him and hastened on. By dint of many inquiries and much patience she found the shop recommended to her; but the proprietor was very different to the kindly man in Regent-street.

Two pounds was his offer; not a penny more, he said bluntly; she could take it or leave it. The thought of the empty larder and no less empty purse at home made Nina consent. She took the two sovereigns and stepped out once more into the street; but she had been detained some time, and the fog had grown so dense she could hardly see a yard in front of her.

Nina, weary and heartick, faint from a long walk taken on insufficient food, was in no state for an emergency which would have puzzled the sharpest wits. She took the wrong turning at Charing-cross, and instead of steering for Tottenham Court-road she wandered towards Piccadilly. There in crossing the road she felt a sudden shock, a whirling sound as of wheels, then all was still, and Nina remembered nothing more.

When she came to herself she was in the sitting-room behind a confectioner's shop, and a young lady with a very coquettish apron and

still more coquettish fringes curled low on her forehead was holding a smelling-bottle to her nose.

"You'll soon be all right now," said this damsel, kindly; "but you've had a narrow escape. If the gentleman hadn't rushed after you, you must have been knocked down."

Nina heard later that she had attempted to cross the road almost in front of a hansom cab, and that a gentleman on seeing her danger had rushed to the rescue, and dragged her literally from under the horse's hoofs. He had saved her life at the risk of his own, and now growing alarmed at her long faint he had gone off for a doctor.

Nina felt ready to sink into the earth. She was grateful for all the kindness shown her, but how was the doctor to be rewarded?

He came in then, an old man, with a kind, fatherly face, examined her arm, which had been knocked against the shafts of the cab, asked a few questions and then walked off, telling her to bathe the arm in cold water, and if still painful to keep it in a sling.

Nina managed some question about payment, but the young lady with the ringlets shook her head.

"He won't think anything about that," she said, confidently. "Why, he was just passing, and it didn't take him a minute. If you're well enough hadn't I better call the gentleman in? You'd like to thank him!"

Nina saw a tall, resolute-looking man, with dark eyes and a strangely thoughtful smile.

Keith Rosalier thought the girl he had rescued from the jaws of death had the sweetest face he had ever seen. He received her simple thanks very quietly, telling her he had done nothing to deserve them. He had been very much alarmed at her long faint, and now wanted to send for her friends, as he was sure she was not fit to go home alone.

"Oh, I am quite well now," said Nina, gratefully, "and, indeed, I need not trouble you." "It would be no trouble."

"Mamma could not come," explained Nina. "She would not leave the children alone, and she could not bring them in this fog."

Keith smiled. He was thinking she looked very much like one of "the children" herself.

"Then you must let me see you home. I am sure you are not fit to go alone."

"I could not trouble you. I live at Camden-town, and it is a long way off. I think I must have lost my way. I was trying to get into the Tottenham Court-road."

"You must have gone wrong at Charing-cross. But I am an idle man, I mean I have nothing to do this afternoon, so you must really let me see you safely home."

Nina blushed crimson.

"Is it really afternoon now?"

"It is nearly three o'clock."

"But it was only twelve when I was in the Strand—and I walked straight here."

"You probably went up and down over the same road. It often happens in a fog one walks miles, so to say, in a circle. But if you live in Camden-town you need have no scruples about accepting my escort, for it happens I have business there, and should have gone to see about it this morning except for the fog."

He had evidently settled the confectioners' claims very much to their satisfaction, for the young lady with the ringlets sent for a cab and saw them into it with a beaming face.

Nina looked a little dubious when she saw it, and Keith observed with ready tact,—

"I am a very bad hand at finding my way, and I am sure you are not well enough to act as guide, so a cab is our best plan."

"An omnibus would have done as well."

Keith smiled.

"I don't like omnibuses, so please forget your prejudices in their favour and share my cab. I wonder if you know Camden-town very well, Miss Dawson?"

Nina wondered how he knew her name, and then guessed—which was the case—the mark on her handkerchief had betrayed it.

"I know it very well, indeed. I have lived there for more than ten years."

"Is it nice?"

Nina hesitated. Personally, she detested Camden-town; but she had been so eagerly warned always to praise it in the interests of the lodgings that she did not know what to say.

"Mamma likes it very much," she replied at last, hitting on an answer which combined sincerity and obedience; "she says it is so convenient."

"That is what people tell me. I am looking out for apartments, and I have been advised to go to Camden-town because it is cheap and convenient. But for the fog I should have started this morning."

A red spot came into Nina's cheeks. If only he had not looked so prosperous, there might have been a chance for her mother, but what young man with those clothes would care to inhabit Mrs. Dawson's ground floor? Still she might make the attempt; for the sake of all the children she must try, only somehow it was very difficult.

"Do you want very grand rooms?" she asked anxiously, "because mamma has some to let, and perhaps they might do till you could get better ones," she added hastily as an afterthought, reflecting that even a fortnight's rent would be a pain.

Keith thought when he saw her anxiety that even if the rooms were the smallest and dirtiest he had ever seen, he must at least look at them rather than refuse. She looked a lady, but oh! how tremulously eager she seemed to find a lodger.

"I don't think I have very grand ideas, Miss Dawson," he said quietly. "I have lived with my uncle for a good many years, but he has gone to America, and so I am obliged to look out for a solitary abode. Perhaps you would introduce me to your mother, and see if we could come to an arrangement."

Nina's eyes brightened.

"We would do our best to make you comfortable," she said shyly. "The last people stayed with us two years; only the house is shabby; it mayn't be like what you have been accustomed to."

It struck Keith that no apartments in Camden-town would be like what he had been accustomed to at his uncle's mansion, but he was very much taken with the girl's sweet face, and he decided if her mother was anything like her he might be very well off at Stock's-terrace.

The cab stopped at the corner, the fog had cleared off by this time, and the Terrace was visible in all its gloomy respectability. Nina would gladly have hurried on so as to say a word in private to her mother, but she could hardly request her preserver to walk behind her, and so they reached the front door together. Keith gave a loud knock, and then retreated a step or two so that Nina might be in front when the door opened.

The opener was a little girl of ten, with a pretty childish face and a quantity of curly hair. Keith noticed the extreme tidiness of her dress, and decided her mother must be very neat. The small maiden did not even perceive him, but said eagerly to her sister,—

"Oh, Nina, where have you been? Mamma is so angry, she's been almost raving!"

Keith saw the distressed look on Nina's face, and stepping forward, took the reply upon himself.

"Your sister has nearly been killed, but she will tell you all about that. Do you think I could see Mrs. Dawson? I have called about the apartments."

Mrs. Dawson must have been somewhere within earshot, for she suddenly appeared, darted a withering glance at Nina, and then turned most affably to the stranger, inviting him to step into the parlour.

He had said to himself he would take the rooms if Mrs. Dawson was like Nina. There was not a shadow of resemblance between them, and yet after five minutes' consultation he had agreed to become the tenant of Mrs. Dawson's ground floor at a weekly rental of five-and-twenty shillings—the odd five shillings being added to the sum usually demanded, on account of his prosperous appearance.

He would take nothing but his breakfast and supper at home, and should be out all day.

He paid a month's rent in advance, and told his landlady he might stay a year or two if he were comfortable.

No wonder Mrs. Dawson bowed him out with a smiling face, and considered for once she was in luck's way.

But not a word of gratitude, not even a kindly "thank you" did she bestow on the little daughter who had gained for her this very desirable inmate.

When Mr. Rosalier had departed she went downstairs to the family sitting-room, which joined the kitchen, asked for and received the price of the necklace, and then said sharply,—

"Come, Nina, it's time you bestirred yourself, you can't sit there doing nothing, like a fine lady! Mr. Rosalier's coming to-morrow, and there's a heap to do before the rooms are ready for him to go into."

CHAPTER III.

It was November when Sir Gerald Anstruther started on his journey to America, and he had hoped to be home again with his destined heiress early in the next year; but February came and went without bringing news of the baronet's return.

He wrote to Keith very often, pleasant rambling letters at first, telling all about his travels, but he never came on any clue to Mrs. Dagdale, and the kind-hearted, if fractious, old man grew sad and was fast coming to the conclusion that his search was in vain, and his old friend's child had gone over to the great majority.

"You will have your own yet," said Mr. Cameron to Keith, meeting the young barrister one bright March day just after he had received a more than usually hopeless letter from Sir Gerald. "It's easy to see Miss Dagdale is dead. Your uncle has been ready to keep his promise. He has behaved, indeed, most exquisitely, but fate is too strong for him, and you will be master of Anstruther after all. By the way, where are you staying? Surely you are tired of Camden-town by this time!"

Keith answered rather shortly that he was still in the same lodgings, and then with a careless nod went off.

He never cared to face Mr. Cameron's questioning, for the lawyer was as sharp as a needle, and might have guessed there was a private attraction which kept Keith faithful to Camden-town, for the months of his uncle's absence had been memorable ones to Mr. Rosalier.

He had been entrusted with a case of some difficulty, and won it. How it came about no one quite knew. He was the junior barrister in court, and as such was called on by the judge to defend a woman whose guilt seemed a foregone conclusion.

The poor creature had blue eyes not unlike Nina Dawson's, perhaps that accounted for it, but Keith pined her, and threw himself into her case heart and soul. He got her off, and in the opinion of the legal world made his own fortune.

This much was certain, from that day briefs came in. Judges began to speak of Rosalier as "that very promising young man," and to bid their wives to send him cards for dinner parties and the like.

It was plain to all eyes but his own that Keith Rosalier had won fortune's smile, and that he would soon have a position men twice his age might envy.

And he stayed on at Stock's-terrace in the two small rooms on Mrs. Dawson's ground floor.

He put up with the service of the one maid of all work. He endured the constant prattling of the next-door neighbour, the poverty-stricken aspect of the house, just as though he had been used to such inconveniences all his life, winning golden opinions of his landlady, and making her the envy of all lodging-housekeepers in the terrace, and yet no human creature in the neighbourhood suspected his secret, that he would have gone away long ago and taken a house of his own but for the magnet which had

lured him to the terrace and kept him there—Nina Dawson's blue eyes.

His infatuation was the stranger because it had very little to feed upon. Nina was the prop of the house. She ruled the kitchen, did all the shopping, taught the children, and was general needswoman to the family. Sometimes for days together Keith never even saw her, and Mrs. Dawson, who was so impressed with her lodger's perfection that she spared no pains for his comfort, would take messages or go errands into the parlours herself in Betty's absence, so that Mr. Rosettur and Nina never met in the way of business.

They lived under the same roof. He was head over heels in love with her, and she admired him much as she admired the knights and heroes in her little sisters' picture-books, but time brought them no nearer each other.

Keith had come to Stock's-terrace on purpose to know Nina, and so after four months in her mother's house they were still strangers, and might have continued so but for something that happened early in those March days.

Mrs. Dawson was given to two holidays a year. Where she went no one knew, but regularly as March and September came round, she would go away, starting early one morning, and returning late the following evening. She never breathed a word as to her proceedings, never answered a question, but she never missed the half-yearly journey.

She had taken the last shilling in the house before now and left the family penniless, but she never failed to go. She always came back looking sad and tired. For days together after her return she would be given to irritability and low spirits.

Not one of her daughters could solve the mystery, but Nina in her heart believed these half-yearly excursions were to her father's grave.

Mrs. Dawson started just as usual, leaving Nina with many injunctions to see after Mr. Rosettur's comfort, but she had not been gone an hour when the father of the little servant came round to say that his wife was dying, and Betty must come home at once. To do the poor man justice he had some thought for Betty's employers and volunteered to send an old woman round night and morning to do the rough work until Betty returned.

Nina had no choice but to agree; if she had had the heart to refuse, Betty could have solved the difficulty by taking French leave, and so it came about that when Mr. Rosettur's knock sounded, a whole hour earlier than usual, the children were out for a walk, and Nina was absolutely the only person in the house.

So they met face to face for the first time since he had lived in her mother's house. Keith and his princess never spoke to each other beyond the simple "Good-morning," which had been the extent of their intercourse.

He listened to the story of Betty's absence with concealed satisfaction. He really could have blessed both her and Mrs. Dawson, since their being away gave him the luxury of this *à tête*.

"You will have to be hospitable and invite me to tea, Miss Dawson," he said, smiling. "You don't suppose I should let you carry that heavy tray upstairs? If you attempt such a thing I shall go out for the rest of the evening."

Nina hesitated and was lost. Keith came downstairs to the family sitting-room, where their frugal meal was spread, and if it was a humbler repast than he had ever shared before, he seemed delighted at having gained his way.

"You've no idea how dreary it is always to have one's meals alone," he told Nina, as they waited for the home-coming of the children. "I often envy you when I hear you laughing."

Nina smiled.

"You see the children have such spirits they will laugh, and now mamma is away I am afraid you will find them dreadfully noisy."

"I'll risk that."

He made himself so delightful throughout the repast that one of the twins was overheard wishing her mother would stay away a week and Mr. Rosettur come to tea every night.

They had no thought of secrecy, these little girls, and they talked to Keith as readily as he listened.

Nina, busy about the house, could not keep watch over their confidence, with the result that when the lodger went to bed that night he knew all about Mrs. Dawson's mysterious journey, and that Tom was at sea, but was coming home some day to make a home for Nina. She was his favourite, though mamma did not care for her a bit.

Keith wondered if it was true or only childish exaggeration. The next morning Nina was amazed by a telegram from her mother saying that she was detained and could not be home that night. There was no mourning over the news.

Mrs. Dawson was a fond mother but not a loving one. The children infinitely preferred Nina's gentle rule to her mother's alternate storms of rage and tenderness.

It was Saturday, and Keith coming home early was met by the twins with the news. He then and there told the little girls he would take them to the Zoological Gardens.

He had made the offer to the children, and Nina's scruples were silenced by their tumultuous delight. In vain she protested it was too far, and there were so many of them.

Keith overruled all her objections, and ended by reappearing with a roomy wagonette, into which the whole party were comfortably packed.

His good nature was far less disinterested than the children believed. The two helpless ones had been left at home in the charwoman's care. The other four were quite old enough to require very little supervision.

Keith produced half-a-crown to be expended in rides on the elephant, and from that moment he and Nina were as much deserted as though they had come to the gardens alone.

"You really should not be so generous, Mr. Rosettur," said Nina, reprovingly, "you should think of yourself."

"I do," said Keith, emphatically. "I am enjoying myself enormously, Miss Dawson. You can't think the good it does me to hear a friendly voice again."

He heard plenty in London every day, but perhaps he forgot that. Nina was touched at once.

"You must miss your uncle very much. How is he getting on in America?"

To Nina it was a foregone conclusion that the old gentleman's voyage had been to seek his fortune. That he had sailed for the New World solely to find an heiress was quite beyond her suspicions.

Keith read her character aright. He felt there was nothing mercenary or scheming about her, and that all her sympathies would be with misfortune, and so he basely began to make use of this conviction, and trade upon her pity.

"No, poor old man. His last letters are most disconsolate. He has not made the least progress, and is nearly in despair."

"I wonder you let him go!"

"I couldn't prevent it."

Nina looked at him reprovingly.

"You can't be very poor," she said, gravely.

"Surely by an effort you could have provided for your poor old uncle instead of letting him go out to America at his time of life."

Here was a complication. Keith did not relish being looked upon as a monster of selfishness, and yet from Nina's point of view he seemed one.

"My uncle is a wonderful man, Miss Dawson!" he said, almost solemnly. "When he has once set his heart upon a thing there is no turning him from it. I would share my last crust with him, but it wouldn't be necessary. While he was in England he had ample for all his wants, and the moment he comes back he can have his old position; but this trip to America was almost a crisis to him. I think he would have broken his heart if he had not gone. I tell him whenever I write he'd better come home, but it's no use."

"It is very kind of his employers to keep his place open for him," said Nina, thoughtfully, "but he must be a very obstinate old man."

"He is; but he has the best heart in the world. When he comes back I should like you to know him."

Nina shook her head.

"I don't expect you will be in Stock's-terrace long."

"Why not?"

The girl hesitated.

"Because you will 'get on,' I thought when you first came you were far too grand for our poor little rooms, and soon you will think so too."

"I don't feel 'grand!'" said Keith. "Of course I am 'getting on,' and I am glad of it; but that's no reason I should leave your mother's house."

Nina shook her head.

"But our lodgers always do leave when they get on. They did years ago when all the furniture was new, and now it is old and shabby."

"Your mother must have had a hard struggle since your father died."

"Yes; and it has changed her so. She was so bright and pretty before then, and he loved her so."

"Was it very sudden?"

"I don't know."

"You were too much of a child to remember!"

"I was twelve years old! They sent us away, me and Tom, and it was three months before we came home again; then—he was gone!"

"Poor child!"

"My mother never spoke of him. She never wore a widow's cap or got black frocks for us. Some people would have thought her unfeeling, perhaps, but I didn't. I seemed to know her heart was just broken."

"She had you left?"

"I think she just kept alive for the sake of the children, but she changed terribly. She had always been fond of me till then."

"And isn't she now?"

Nina raised her eyes to his face. They were full of tears.

"I ought not to tell you, Mr. Rosettur, but it has so puzzled me; and you, who are a man, and know the world, might understand it, though I cannot. From the time we came home to find papa dead my mother has seemed almost to hate me."

"She couldn't," said Keith, impulsively.

"It is ten years ago now, and she has never changed. In all that time she has never given me one loving word. She has tried even to estrange the children from me."

Keith looked bewildered.

"Did Mr. Dawson die of any infectious disease?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"It would be glaringly unjust, of course, but if he died of any disorder caught from you it would a little explain her conduct."

Nina shook her head.

"I never had a day's illness in my life."

"Then it is an enigma to me. Have you no relations, no friends who could remonstrate with your mother?"

"I don't want anyone to do that. No, we have no relations. We had one friend. She came to fetch us home when father died. Tom and I called her the 'kind old lady.' She was very pretty, and wore silks and velvets. I don't think mamma liked her, but she was very kind."

"A neighbour perhaps?"

"I don't know. She cried when she told us papa was dead. We had never seen her before. Then when she took us home she led me up to mamma and said I at least would be a comfort to her, but mamma pushed me away and took Tom's hand. It has been so ever since."

"And the kind old lady?"

"She furnished this house for us and brought us here. I think she paid my school bills and got Tom to a ship. She used to send us presents very often, but she never came to see us, and she has been dead now some time."

"What was her name?"

"I never heard."

"Your mother seems fond of secrecy!"

"Yes. I am twenty-two now, and I could

understand her troubles if she would only trust me, but she always keeps me at arm's length. Sometimes I think I will go away and seek my fortune, but the children could never spare me till Alice is grown up, and she is only twelve.

"They are all very fond of you!"

"Yes. It is strange, isn't it? Mother has done her best to prevent it, but they will cling to me."

"They are none of them like you. I suppose you take after your father!"

"Oh, no. Alice is the image of papa."

Alice had jet-black hair and large black eyes. A pretty child, but with a peculiar expression Keith did not quite like. Her eyes gleamed sometimes with almost ferocious brightness. The best-hearted of children by nature, yet every one in the house feared Alice when her face took one particular look.

The rides on the elephant came to an end at last. Nina collected her flock and took them home. The charwoman had only prepared one tea, and Keith sat down with the Dawsons as a matter of course. He also dined with them the next day, and by the time his landlady came home he was quite intimate with the whole family.

Mrs. Dawson did not return till the Thursday, and then there was a white, set expression on her face which touched Keith's heart.

He did not like her. Indeed, there was something about her which repelled him strangely, but he felt sorry for her. He was certain she had known bitter sorrow, and that there was a secret in her life.

He found himself wondering very anxiously what the secret could be. Poor Keith occupied his thoughts a good deal with Mrs. Dawson's affairs, for those few days of intercourse had only strengthened his folly—if folly it was—and the young barrister, with wealth and fame before him, the man who might have aspired to a judge's daughter, had lost his heart once and for always to Nina Dawson, and had quite made up his mind to marry her or go a bachelor all his days.

He was very much in love. He thought Nina the sweetest, truest girl he had ever met, but yet he was not in the least blinded to the drawbacks of the connection. He felt there was something about Mrs. Dawson he could not fathom and should never like. He feared there was a dark secret in her past life, but for all that he never hesitated, if only he could win Nina's love he would marry her and treat her mother as his own.

He thought his difficulties lay with Nina. He believed a hundred or so a year paid to Mrs. Dawson would amply console her for the loss of the daughter she did not appreciate. That his landlady would be the person to raise objections to his suit never once occurred to him.

She had come back grave and more subdued than he had ever seen her. She seemed to take no interest whatever in anything around her, and to leave house and children entirely to Nina. The spring was coming on now, and the evenings were light and pleasant. Nina and her sisters began to take country walks (if the most rural outskirts of Camden-town deserve that name) and it came about quite naturally that Keith met them and joined in the expeditions. Never a more honourable woman than the young barrister. He never said a word on these occasions that the most vigorous of chaperons could have objected to. His one aim seemed to be Nina's enjoyment, and if he led her to look forward to his society with pleasure, to meet him gladly and to part from him with regret, who can blame him, since he was only waiting for the least hope of her consent to ask her to be his wife. Gloomy mother, mysterious history, and friendless state—he was willing to overlook all these drawbacks if only Nina would accept his name.

It came at last, a lovely June evening, when he met Nina returning from some errand for her mother. For a wonder she was quite alone, not even the twins were with her. Keith felt his opportunity was come, and telling Nina he wanted her advice upon a very important subject, he persuaded her to leave the High-street,

with its din of omnibuses, and tramway and go home with him through quiet side streets where they could talk as uninterruptedly as in a fashionable boudoir.

"You have heard from your uncle, and there is good news at last," said Nina, quickly. "I am quite sure of it, for I never saw you look so bright."

"I have not heard from my uncle, and my cheerfulness is selfish," said Keith. And he went on to tell her how his first book was accepted by a firm of eminent publishers on such liberal terms as he had never dared to hope for. Besides an intimation, they were disposed to consider anything else from his pen; he had a hundred a year of his own, and he was now justified in counting his professional income from all sources (he never said he was a barrister) at not less than five hundred a year. He was tired of being alone; he longed for a house of his own; did not Nina think his means were sufficient to warrant him in seeking one?

Nina smiled half sadly.

"Did I not tell you you would soon be leaving Stock's terrace?" she asked quietly.

"Yes; but I shall never leave it unless I take you with me, Nina, my love, my darling. Don't you understand? I have learned to hold you dearer than aught else on earth. I have only kept silence hitherto because I so feared a rejection, Nina; the home I want is one that you would share. Dear, won't you trust yourself to me and promise to be my wife?"

"Your wife!"

"Is it astonishing I should love you?" asked Keith, half impatiently. "Can I see you day after day and not long to call you my own, and do what heart and strength can to save you from trouble? Nina, you have not seen much of me; but, my darling, you have seen enough to tell me if it is quite hopeless!"

Nina hesitated, and he went on.

"Dear, indeed you may trust my love. I am not far from thirty, and I never cared for any woman until I saw you. You are my first choice, and you will be my last."

The tears stood in her eyes.

"But you will be rich and great," she whispered. "You ought to marry some fine lady, and I am only Nina."

"I want only Nina," said Keith, passionately. "Dear, don't keep me in suspense. Tell me plainly, do you think you could ever learn to love me?"

"No," said Nina, quietly. "I could never learn that, because I love you now! I could not help it, you were so kind to me. From the first hour of our meeting you seemed to seek my happiness, and take care of me as no one had ever done before."

"Then you will make me happy, Nina! You will let me tell Mrs. Dawson you are going to be my wife!"

Nina started as one aroused from some happy dream.

She tried to take away the hand that rested on Keith's arm.

"How selfish I am! I forgot about the children. Mamma could never spare me."

"I have thought of that, dear. I grant we could not go away and be happy, leaving them uncared for; but I think, if we make up our minds, we can live very quietly ourselves, and then I might allow your mother a hundred a year or so to help her to make both ends meet."

Nina shook her head.

"You ought not take such a burden on you."

"Child, don't you understand? Nothing can be a burden to me so long as I have you. It is the thought of losing you would trouble me, all else I can bear. If I judge you rightly, dear, you won't mind beginning life rather humbly, so that we may try to make things smooth for those you leave."

"Keith, I think you are the most generous man I ever met!"

"May you ever think so, darling. And now, tell me, shall I speak to Mrs. Dawson to-night? Is she at home?"

"She is at home. Keith, I cannot tell what

to make of mamma; she is stranger than ever since she was away that time in March.

"Be easy, Nina; I don't think Mrs. Dawson dislikes me personally. She has never known how to value you, and so I have least compunction in taking you away."

"But if she should refuse?"

"Then, Nina, I must—forgive my speaking plainly, dear—try to buy her consent. I believe she only values you because you are of use to her. If I enable her to employ a substitute to do the work these little hands have done so willingly, I think all will be right."

But Nina was trembling from head to foot.

"She is my own mother, Keith, but she does not love me. Don't think me mad, but I think she will hate the idea of my being happy."

"Nina," said her lover, gravely, "I believe myself there is some secret in your mother's life. Let us look things bravely in the face together. Supposing Mrs. Dawson forbids our engagement, what shall we do?"

"I shall never forget you, Keith."

"That is not the point, dear. Your mother's opposition, if aroused, will spring from some secret cause neither of us can fathom, so we shall be powerless to remove it, dear. We cannot waste our whole lives for a caprice. You are twenty-two, if my persuasions cannot win a consent from your mother, will you dispense with it, and come to me without it?"

"And leave them in poverty?"

"No. I promise you I would allow Mrs. Dawson the same amount as though she had acted the part of a kind, tender mother. My uncle is away, but I have an old, tried friend who would, I know, receive you until we could be married. Nina, it is your own fears that make me speak so plainly. I had never fancied Mrs. Dawson would be implacable, but you have made me strangely anxious, dear. Before we turn into the terrace, dear, promise me this: whatever happens, you will not take back your word! You are, you will be, my own plighted wife!"

And there in the sweet stillness of the June evening she promised him.

CHAPTER IV.

KEITH went in first. Nina had still her errand to accomplish, and perhaps both the lovers felt it better for Mrs. Dawson to hear of the engagement from her future son-in-law before she met them together.

Keith congratulated himself he was alone when his landlady herself opened the door. He was not a coward; he had faced many a danger in youth, but he did shrink with a strange reluctance from his interview with Nina's mother.

"To speak to me," said Mrs. Dawson as she heard his request, and followed him into the parlour. "Of course you can, but I know pretty well what's coming, Mr. Rositar, you are going away!"

Poor Keith! How he got it out he never knew, but in a few words he told Mrs. Dawson of his hopes, and begged for her consent to his marrying her eldest daughter.

He said he was getting on, and likely before long to have ample means; even now he was able to make a comfortable home for Nina, and to—if she would allow it—help her mother.

Mrs. Dawson listened in perfect silence, her features never moved a muscle. She waited until he had quite finished, and then she said as quietly and composedly as though she had not been crushing his dearest hopes,—

"I am very sorry to hear this, Mr. Rositar. You are a gentleman. You would have been a son-in-law after my own heart, but it is quite impossible!"

Keith persevered.

"I hope you may be persuaded to think differently," he said, gravely. "Nina herself is willing to trust her happiness to me."

"I will never give my consent!" cried Mrs. Dawson, sharply. "If you were worth your weight in gold, sir, my answer would be the same!"

Keith felt indignant. He knew he was a far

better match than she could have hoped for. He knew also that she only valued Nina for the sake of her usefulness.

"I think I have a right to demand your reason," he said, gravely. "I might remind you, that, being of age, Nina can marry me without your consent, but I would far rather ask you in a friendly spirit, what is your objection to me?"

"I have none whatever. You have been the kindest, most considerate lodger I ever had, but I do not intend Nina to marry at all!"

"With her face I don't think you would have kept her free from lovers even if I had not found out her attractions. Mrs. Dawson, do be persuaded; give your consent to my marrying Nina, and let me do my best to help you with the other children."

Mrs. Dawson went to the door and shut it abruptly; she returned to her chair and looked searchingly into Roseltur's face.

"Can I trust you? If I tell you my reason, will you promise me to keep it secret?"

Keith hesitated, he hated mystery.

"I may surely tell Nina! She would have as much right to know as I have."

"You may tell Nina. You can tell your own people if you choose; all I ask is that you will not let it get abroad here in Camden-town, that you will not let the shadow fall on my children's lives. It is for their sakes I have kept the secret, for their sakes I will spend my life in trying to keep it still."

Again she spoke of "her children" as though Nina were not one of them, but Roseltur never heeded this.

"I promise you, faithfully, Mrs. Dawson, I will keep it from your younger daughters, and from any one who knows you."

"When you came here you thought I was a widow, did not you?"

"I think so still."

"I am a widow now," she said, slowly, "but when you came here I was a wife, a much-suffered, heavily-troubled wife. For ten long years my husband has been lost to view; when I went away for that week in March I was summoned to his death-bed. He died in the place where he had been confined for ten long years—a lunatic asylum. Now do you understand?"

Keith staggered against the wall as one smitten by a sudden blow.

"You see," went on Mrs. Dawson, in a kinder tone, "why I can't let Nina marry you, why with my consent she shall never marry anyone. Her father's curse is in her blood. The blow may fall on her at any moment."

For two minutes there was silence, then Keith had nerved himself for the worst.

"Do you mean the disease is hereditary in your husband's family?"

"I do. His mother and her mother before her died insane. He was the only child of a rich man's second marriage. His step-brother is now an officer of wealth and position, who would verify every word I say. He was furious at poor Charlie's marriage. He wanted him to be a bachelor, and so—at his put it—the curse died out."

"All through my married life the Dawsons took no notice of me, but when the blow came and—my husband had to be put away, I wrote to them, and his step-sister came to see me."

"She was very kind, but I did not take to her. She furnished this house for me, and while she lived things were easier for me. She helped in many ways, but she would not persuade her brother, the head of the family, to acknowledge the children as his relations. She said it was best they should remain in obscurity, there was less chance of their marrying. She made a sailor of my boy, thinking the freedom of the life his best chance of escape."

"Mr. Roseltur, some day you will bless me for my present refusal. Think what I have suffered with my husband, for ten years in an asylum, and a shadow only less than the stigma of crime ready to fall at any moment on my children's heads. Be thankful I have saved you from yourself."

She went slowly out of the room, and poor Keith sat down and tried to understand the

calamity that had come to him, but the strangest part of it was that he did not believe it.

He had always thought there was a secret in Mrs. Dawson's life. He had always felt it concerned her husband. She had spoken to him eagerly, with tears in her eyes even, as she mentioned "Charlie's" fate, Nina's own confidences about her mother's half-yearly absences, about the "kind old lady" who came to them at the time of her father's loss, even the fact of her mother buying them no black frocks and herself wearing no widow's cap, all these things confirmed Mrs. Dawson's story, and yet he did not believe the reason she gave was her true one for parting him and Nina.

He did not like his landlady. He never had liked her, and he had no very high opinion of her sense of honour. She cared—he knew—nothing for Nina. Why should she care more for him? He had offered to allow her a hundred a-year from his wedding day, and she had refused on "conscientious" scruples.

Mr. Roseltur did not believe one bit in these scruples. He began to wonder whether the wealthy brother-in-law she alluded to had offered her a handsome bribe to keep her girls unmarried, but dismissed the idea because they were all living in the greatest poverty when he first came to Stock's-terrace, which quite disproved it.

He sat thinking over his future till his very brain ached, and at last he decided two things. He would not believe Mrs. Dawson's story until it had been confirmed by some other person, and even then he would not give up Nina unless a high medical authority told him there was a danger of her inheriting her father's malady.

Keith had once thought of studying medicine instead of law, and he had picked up more than a smattering of the sciences.

He knew that little Alice Dawson possessed every sign of the constitution likely to develop the seeds of insanity. Already her fits of passion were terrible to witness. She was—Nina had said—her father's image, but Nina herself was quite a different type. The absolute quiet and repose of her disposition, her clear thoughtful eyes, her patience and equable spirits and calm manner were all totally opposed to the signs of madness.

He remembered her innocent story of how the nameless friend whom Nina called the "kind old lady" had led the girl to her mother saying, "she at least will comfort you," and he built a theory for himself that Nina was far from the taint.

He knew in families afflicted with dementia there were often two or three sane members. He had heard of cases where the colour of the eyes or the shape of the forehead had been the sign of the children's future, and had even met mothers who had proved this among their own families.

Now Nina's eyes were blue—blue as the sapphire itself, and all her little sisters had black eyes with rather prominent pupils.

Only granted he was right—granted that Nina would be safe from the family scourge, why had her mother told him of it? Why had a nearly penniless woman at one stroke refused a husband for her daughter and a good addition to her income?

It bewildered him, and he longed for some other opinion on it, but who was he to ask? Mr. Cameron would have taken an adverse view to save his client at any cost from what he deemed a *misalliance*. Uncle Gerald was far away, and though Keith had heaps of friends there was not one intimate enough and trusted enough to be his confidant.

Keith's first act was to write to Nina. It was difficult enough to send his letter, but fortunately the little maid-servant was devoted to her young mistress, and though Mr. Roseltur hated such a means of communication, he saw no other way. So giving Betsy half-a-crown and his note, he told her to give it to Nina when she was alone.

The household drudge earned her money, and Nina, who had wondered much at hearing noth-

ing from her mother, guessed at once from the little missive that things were going wrong, for brief as it was it had not a hopeful ring.

"I must see you and alone. Will you meet me at Marble Arch at five o'clock to-night.—K. R."

Nina said nothing to her mother. Perhaps she felt it was a crisis in her life, and she must take her own way.

When Betsy put the tea on the table, and was sent to call the eldest Miss Dawson, she could not find her, and at that very moment Nina and her lover had seated themselves on a bench in Hyde Park, as far as possible from the fashionable crowd, and the girl, looking anxiously up into Keith's face, said, sadly,—

"I am sure you have seen mamma, and that she would not listen."

Keith felt more certain than ever there was something false about Mrs. Dawson's story as he glanced into Nina's beautiful eyes; his voice was very grave and thoughtful as he answered her.

"Your mother refused her consent absolutely. She said she would not let you marry me if I were worth my weight in gold. Nina, my darling, do not tremble so. I want you to be brave and hopeful for my sake."

"I can bear anything for you, Keith. Do you know I felt you had spoken to mamma. She has been so strange all day. She has hardly spoken at all, but has done nothing but write letters."

"I did not think she had a large correspondence!"

"She has not. Keith, do you think it was wrong of me? I could not help seeing the address of two of her letters. One was to Sir Edward Dawson. It did seem so odd. We are so poor and struggling I can't believe there is a baronet in our family."

It came on Keith like a revelation that he had a case now on hand in which his client was Sir Edward Dawson. Of course he had remarked the name was the same as his landlady's, but he had never given the coincidence a second thought.

Dawsons were nearly as common as Smiths. Now his heart gave a great bound. Sir Edward was a soldier of old family and large means, thus far answering exactly to the description given by his landlady of her husband's step-brother.

Also he was a man of intense truthfulness and great generosity. Keith felt that however painful it might be to himself Sir Edward would answer his questions and answer them truly.

"Nina, I want you to think very carefully and try to tell me. Did the difference Mrs. Dawson has always made between you and the little ones exist in your father's lifetime?"

Nina looked puzzled.

"Not so much," she said, slowly; "but I think mamma never loved me so much as the little ones. I was papa's favourite always."

"And where did you live first?"

Nina shook her head.

"I have no idea. I don't think it was in England, because I can just remember a big ship, and papa holding me up to see the sailors climb the rigging."

"What did your father do for a profession? Try and recollect what he was, Nina!"

But here Nina's memory failed. She could not tell. She was certain that they were better off—much better off. Sometimes money was plentiful, and her father would bring home presents for them all. At others her mother would look troubled; he was very gay and cheerful, except sometimes he would get excited—just like Alice.

"Nina, do you think you are brave enough not to fret or be frightened if I tell you what your mother said was her objection to our marriage, dear? If you were different I should not dare to tell you, but I think there should be no secrets between us."

"I would rather know, Keith."

So he told her, softening, in his love, the news as much as possible, and Nina listened, her face growing sad and pale.

"It is very terrible," she said, slowly, "but Keith, I think it is true. It explains so much."

that has puzzled me, and of course mamma is right—we must part."

"Nina, I will never give you up unless it is proved to me beyond a doubt that there is a chance of your inheriting that fearful curse. I don't believe it. I think—Heaven forgive me if I wrong her—your mother has invented the excuse as a plea for parting us."

"She could not be so cruel."

Keith held the little hand tenderly in both of his.

"Nina, promise me you will be true to me. You won't let yourself be frightened into giving me up. I shall go to see Sir Edward Dawson; if he says your father really was insane you must still promise me to trust me. My uncle has a friend whose name is famous throughout the world as an authority on insanity. If Sir Edward confirms your mother's statement, will you let me tell our story to Dr. Laver and abide by his decision?"

"It seems wronging you, Keith."

"My darling, it would be wronging me to forsake me without cause. Nina, I do not want to blame your mother, but I cannot feel that she is treating us fairly. I seem to know she has a secret reason for wishing to part us."

They sat on together a little longer, an agony in both their hearts. The world looked so fair on that bright summer evening if only they might go through life together. They loved each other deeply, devotedly, and yet it seemed well nigh certain they must part.

It was no idle fancy, no mere liking. Keith Rosseter had seen many a more beautiful woman, had known many far more fascinating, but he had kept heart-whole in spite of all until he was made captive by one glance of Nina's blue eyes.

He had saved her life, remember, so he had some claim on her; then, too, he had seen her in her home; he knew her worth, knew that among all the troubles of poverty she was ever brave and patient.

He had gloried in his success only for her dear sake. He had been so glad to think he could find her a happy home, and even, so to say, buy her release from her sordid round of duties at Stock's-terraces.

There was no one to consult on his side. Sir Gerald Anstruther, if he could not succeed in his pet scheme by marrying his nephew to Geraldine Dagdale, would not mind in the least whom Keith chose.

Indeed there was enough romance left in the kind old man, in spite of his sixty years, for him to delight in a genuine love match.

And yet they must be parted. Nina felt a sad conviction her mother's tale was true. Keith fought against the instinct which told him it was probable. He believed if worst came to worst his friend, Dr. Laver, would declare Nina's future free from her father's doom, but he knew in his own heart that if this last hope failed he must give way.

He had seen something during his stay in Stock's-terraces of Alice Dawson's occasional fits of passion; not even to call Nina his own would he risk such an inheritance as he felt was hers for his future children.

So it was not to be wondered at that there was a sadness neither could shake off about the interview.

"Keith," said Nina, gently, "when do you suppose we shall know the truth?"

"I mean to go to Sir Edward to-morrow, dear. I do not believe he will refuse me any information in his power."

"And then?"

"If it be as I hope, I shall speak to your mother once again. Should she persist in her refusal, Nina, I think we had better be married at once. After telling such a cruel falsehood to try to part us she will deserve no consideration."

"But if it is true, Keith?"

"I shall go and talk to Laver, and then I must ask you to let me take you to him. You will not mind, Nina, he is such a kind old man—and it is for my sake."

She would not have minded anything for him.

"Keith," the girl said, gravely, "if the worst happens, you will have to leave Stock's-terraces."

"Must I?"

"Yes," said Nina, bravely. "If you have to forget me, you must go away; if Dr. Laver's opinion is against us, dear, you must never see my face again; it ought to be to you as though I were dead."

"I shall never forget you, Nina. I will go away, of course, if you insist upon it, but my dear, it will be of no use. I shall love you and you only till I die."

"When is your uncle coming home?"

"How strange you should mention him. I had a letter from the dear old man this morning, and he says he is quite in despair of success in what he went out for. He will give one month more to the quest and then renounce the effort and come home. He may be with us by the end of July."

"I'm glad."

He looked at her lovingly.

"Oh! do you think any kindred, any friends, can make up to me for losing you? My Nina, if I have to give you up, nothing else will matter to me."

CHAPTER V., AND LAST.

SIR EDWARD DAWSON was just a little surprised when Mr. Rosseter's card was brought to him. He had seen his solicitors only that morning, and they had not given him any notice that the young barrister engaged in his forthcoming lawsuit would call upon him.

The Baronet had seen Keith Rosseter a week ago, and taken a great fancy to him. The business was one he had very much at heart, but hardly a case to excite much controversy. A farmer, who was one of Sir Edward's tenants, had built a chapel on his land, a hideous iron construction, which, being movable, he could take away with him when his lease expired, or set up bodily now at some other place.

Sir Edward contended his consent had never been applied to for its erection. He was a staunch Churchman and hated the hideous building. Moreover, his dignity as a landlord was injured. Mr. Dobbs contended he could do as he liked, so long as he paid his rent. The chapel was used for revival services of a very peculiar character, being, in fact, a new departure altogether, and boasting a brass band and other attractions. The neighbours objected as much as their landlord, so Sir Edward could plead the depreciation of his property. Taken altogether, the cause was a very obstinate one, and there being plenty of money on both sides, it would probably be fought out to the bitter end. But still there was nothing in its nature to necessitate a call from Sir Edward's advocate at his private residence.

"Why, what's happened, Mr. Rosseter?" exclaimed the Baronet. "My man says you called this morning while I was out. Have you discovered any fresh evidence?"

"Sir Edward, I must plead selfishness in my errand. I have come to you on private business; but one so all-important to myself I venture to hope you will spare me a few minutes."

"My dear sir, I'll spare you the whole afternoon if you like. My time is not so valuable now I have retired from the service; but how I possibly can be of use to you I can't guess."

"You will pardon me if I intrude on any private grief," said Keith, simply; "but, indeed, I know of no one but yourself who could solve my doubts."

"Only say how I can help you," returned the Baronet, "and I will do my best. I promise you."

"Is it true, Sir Edward, that you had a half brother who died this year insane?"

Sir Edward started.

"Then that explains the extraordinary letter I received this morning! I cannot imagine your object in asking me the question, Mr. Rosseter; but I must confirm Mrs. Charles Dawson's story. Her husband was my half-brother, and for the last ten years of his life he was in a lunatic

asylum. Good gracious, what's the matter! It can't matter to you, surely!"

Keith Rosseter had grown as white as marble. His hands trembled like a woman's. The kind-hearted baronet was shocked.

"I would never have told you so hurriedly had I guessed you would feel it so much; but I can't for the life of me understand how poor Charles' fate can trouble you. You had better read his wife's—his widow's—letter. It came this morning."

It was very short and very simple, but its personal only strengthened Keith's prejudice against Mrs. Dawson.

"DEAR SIR,

"Although you have refused to have anything to do with me or mine, you will, I think, hardly refuse an act of justice. If applied to on the subject will you confirm my statement that I am the widow of your step-brother who died a lunatic.—Yours obediently,

"M. DAWSON."

"I don't understand," said Keith, slowly. "Why should she write like that! Your word is quite enough for me; but oh, Sir Edward, you have crushed my every hope."

"Do speak plainly!" said the baronet, testily. "What can the fact of my half-brother's insanity have to do with you?"

"Only this," was the sad reply, "I am engaged to his daughter, and I shall love her all my life!"

Sir Edward looked at him sharply.

"She must be a mere child! Besides I have heard—I think my sister who befriended the whole family told me—that the eldest girl was half-witted."

"That is Marion," returned Keith, quietly, "she is sixteen. My fiancée is the eldest of the whole family. She is turned twenty-two!"

Sir Edward looked bewildered.

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. She was twelve years old—she tells me—when she lost her father."

"Then, Mr. Rosseter, she is not my step-brother's daughter, and therefore his sanity can matter nothing to you. At the time of his death poor Charles was under forty, and it is barely eighteen years since he made his disastrous marriage."

Keith stared at him in dumb surprise; but there was no mistaking the look of intense relief on his face.

"I will tell you the whole story," said Sir Edward, kindly, "and see if it explains things to you."

"In extreme old age my father married as his second wife a beautiful Spaniard. She died soon after the birth of her only child, but not before she had shown signs of insanity, and my father discovered the malady was hereditary in the family, for as long as people could trace back there had been at least one insane person in each generation."

"I can confess to you it was a fearful blow to my father's pride. By his will, he left a liberal provision for the son of his old age on the condition that he never married."

"We all loved Charles in spite of the doom that hung over him. He was, I think, the most fascinating creature I ever met. He was bred to no profession; but music was his hobby. He could always have made a living by his voice. He was, I think, eighteen, perhaps nineteen, when he went to Ireland on a long tour."

"The months passed, and we all wondered why he lingered. At last the truth burst on us. Unknown to any of his friends, he had married a widow whom he met during his wanderings. With the cunning inherent in those subject to dementia, he had kept his secret hidden till he came of age, and it was too late to quash the marriage."

"He supported his wife out of the liberal allowance made him as a bachelor. The truth might never have been discovered, but my eldest brother—I was not Sir Edward then—grew alarmed at the lad's silence, and went to Killybeg to hunt him up."

"Charles was then barely twenty-two. His

wife was a very pretty woman, several years his senior, and there were already two or three children.

"I was abroad at the time, and did not gather all particulars, but I can prove to you that Charles was only thirty-eight this January, and that he lived entirely with his relations down to the period of his going to Ireland eighteen years ago.

"His eldest child, therefore, could not be much over seventeen. If I had been in England and the head of the family I should have acted differently. My brother Andrew was an intensely proud man; he refused to recognise the woman Charles had married, and acting on the power given him by our father's will, cut off his allowance."

"And then?"

"Then comes a gap in the history. I can tell you nothing more until ten years ago my sister, Miss Dawson, received an agonised letter from Mrs. Charles; the malady had declared itself! Her husband was hopelessly insane, what was she to do! Lucy was a good woman. She placed Charles in an asylum and paid a yearly sum for his support. She helped his wife and children liberally.

"When I came home to England shortly before her death, I took, of course, the payment to the asylum on myself, but I have always shrunk from any communication with the wife and children.

"The latter I considered doomed creatures, and I could never forget that their mother had married a lad of nineteen without the consent of his family.

"She was a woman not far from thirty and a widow; she must have known there was something suspicious in the strangely hurried secret manner of her marriage, and I think myself she deserved all she got."

"And my Nina?"

"I should say she was the child of Mrs. Dawson's first marriage. Of course, I can give you no proof, but of one thing I am certain, she has no relationship whatever to our family.

"Understand me, Mr. Rosetier, I am not recommending you to marry her. Her father may have been a swindler or thief for aught I know, but you may rest assured he was not my half-brother."

"Thank Heaven!"

"Then you mean to go on with it?"

Kelth's face lit up with a brilliant smile.

"I would marry her to-morrow if I only could."

"I wonder why the mother tried to part you," said the baronet, reflectively. "You are a son-in-law she might well be proud of, and, poor woman, I should have thought with so many children to get rid of only one would be a relief."

"It is inscrutable. I offered to allow Mrs. Dawson a hundred a year to make up to her the loss of Nina's services, but she declared she would not consent to the marriage if I were worth my weight in gold."

"Well, happily you won't need her consent, since the young lady is over age, but remember, Mr. Rosetier, the world would tell you you are throwing yourself away."

Kelth's answer was a sunny smile.

"When you have seen her, sir, you will understand."

"Perhaps you will let me have that pleasure after she is Mrs. Rosetier?"

And then they parted with a friendly hand shake, Kelth carrying away with him a light heart.

It is astonishing how quickly things can be procured if only a person has plenty of money and a head on his shoulders.

Kelth went straight from Sir Edward's to Doctor's Commons and got a marriage licence, describing his bride as Nina, commonly called Nina Dawson, daughter of Mary Dawson, of Stock's-terrace, Camden-town, and her first husband's name unknown.

Then he took a cab to a house agent's with such good results that before dark he was the accepted tenant of a very pretty little villa at Fulham, whose invalid mistress promised to vacate it in two days, leaving her eminently

respectable servant to attend on the new inmate.

Kelth had a debate with himself as to whether he should see Mrs. Dawson and boldly tell her he had discovered her treachery; but he decided against it. Fate was very kind to him that night. His landlady had gone round to the doctor's and Nina herself opened the door.

"Kelth!"

"It is all right, my own," said the young man, cheerfully. "You are no daughter of poor Charles Dawson, but the only child of his wife's first marriage. Nina, I want to be married on Monday. I have got the licence and everything. When once you are my wife we will see your mother together and ask why she tried so hard to part us."

The two lovers had no other chance of a word together. Betsy once again acted as Cupid's messenger, and carried a little note to Nina, which would not have enlightened Mrs. Dawson much if she had intercepted and read it, since it contained only two lines—

"Monday at ten o'clock, round the corner."

The parish church was round the corner, and the appointment was for their wedding; but no third person who had read the little note would have guessed as much, though, happily, Betsy was faithful, and no eyes saw it but Nina's.

Kelth received a telegram from Liverpool on the Saturday morning announcing his uncle's arrival. The baronet was going straight to Anstruther Park, but would be in London on the Monday, and hoped to call at his nephew's chambers; he had never had the address at Stock's-terrace.

Kelth decided to leave a line inviting him to come on to Fulham. It would be rather odd to receive visitors on his wedding day, but he was anxious to introduce his bride to his uncle, and as to the proceedings being "strange," that applied to every incident of his courtship.

It was a beautiful day; the summer sunshine lit up every corner of the handsome church. The clergyman had a rich musical voice, and read the service as impressively as though there had been a distinguished congregation. Kelth had a thrill of surprise and of genuine pleasure when at the question, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" Sir Edward Dawson stepped forward and took the office on himself instead of leaving it to the solemn clerk.

It was over! They were married; the baronet had wished them joy and departed. Kelth and his wife walked slowly down the well-known street and turned into Stock's-terrace.

"I feel so frightened," whispered Nina.

"You need not," said her husband, proudly. "No one can part us now; but would you rather I went and braved your mother's anger alone?"

"No, we will go together."

Betsy received them with a broad grin. Betsy had very shrewd suspicions of what had occurred.

"Your ma's been calling you everywhere, Miss Nina," she said cheerfully. "There's an old gent come that wants to see you. He's in Mr. Rosetier's parlour."

The bride and bridegroom went in together. There sat Mrs. Dawson in her best attire, and opposite her—Sir Gerald Anstruther!

"This is Geraldine," began the widow in her blindest tones, but Kelth interrupted her.

"Uncle Gerald! Is it possible?"

"Kelth, my boy, how on earth did you come here?"

"Why, I live here—at least, I used to. Didn't you come on purpose to see me?"

The explanation was very simple. Sir Gerald, feeling in despair of finding his old friend's child, had directed Mr. Cameron to advertise for the present address of Geraldine Dagdale. Mrs. Dawson saw the advertisement and answered it, believing fortune was coming to her all in a rush.

The cruel refusal to Kelth's suit, the wicked deception she tried to practise on him arose from her fear of losing Sir Gerald's bounty.

He had never cared for her. His godchild married and gone, she would have had no claim upon him, and so she had tried to frighten Mr. Rosetier away.

Her own story was a sad one. She had returned a widow to Ireland—her native country—and married Charles Dawson in ignorance, she said, of the fate which threatened him.

From the very first he had shown such mad, unreasoning jealousy for her first husband that she had dropped all allusion to her earlier marriage, and brought up Nina as his own child.

She had loved him, she confessed, far better than she had ever loved George Dagdale, and his children were dearer to her than those of poor George.

It had been a bitter trial to her all these years to know the doom which threatened them, while Nina's future was unclouded by any such dire inheritance.

Perhaps there was some excuse for her. She declared she would have given her consent to Nina's marriage with Kelth thankfully but for the hope which had dawned on her of Sir Gerald's marriage, and her fear that, Nina gone, she would do nothing for them.

Those who are happy can afford to be merciful, and Sir Gerald delighted that he could, with a clear conscience, leave his estate to his nephew, was not likely to be severe on Mrs. Dawson.

He settled three hundred a year on her by deed of gift, so that she no longer has occasion to let lodgings, and a great tide of prosperity has dawned for No. 47, Stock's-terrace.

As for Nina (so one ever called her Geraldine), she was established as mistress of Anstruther Park, and became the sunshine of Sir Gerald's old age.

Her husband grew famous as a barrister, and wealth and honours came to him in his profession; but all those who know him best declare that he values no earthly gift in comparison with his wife's smile, and that he and Nina are just as assuredly in love with each other as years ago, when their attachment first began—a ground floor romance in "MRS. DAWSON'S LODGINGS."

[THE END.]

FLOWER OF FATE.

—101—

CHAPTER XX.

If it had not been for a vague, yet strangely strong feeling that in some way her brother would need her, Madge would have left Moretown Hall for awhile during the period of the theatricals, and have gone to Bantley to stay with Amy and her mother.

But Sir Kelth's face alone, even if she had not been the unwilling hearer of the truth from Lady Ance's lips that day in the library, would have stayed her.

She bided herself to do many a little act of thoughtfulness for the brother who was so tender to her, and heedless of Lady Ance's sneers and studied insults she held her way quietly. The Countess de Gonyaul and her daughter were reckoned delightful by the rest of the guests, and none knew that their presence was unwelcome to their host, so courteous was he towards them.

Madge kept carefully aloof from all the preparations for the theatricals; she had no desire to be much in her frivolous sister-in-law's company, and preferred solitude to the chatter and flirtation that prevailed. Most of the men secretly deplored her absence; there was something so sweet, refreshing and thoughtful about her, she won all their hearts.

The Countess tried hard to make friends with her whilom stepdaughter, but Madge was no hypocrite, and she received all advances in a frigidly polite manner, which aggravated Lady Ance beyond words.

One day Sir Kelth's wife met his sister in the grounds.

"Still industrious, Miss Lorraine? I beg your pardon, Mrs. Watson," she sneered, seeing Madge's gardening gloves, basket, and scissars. "I am afraid you find it very dull here without your customary life of excitement and theatre work!"

"I am happy to be with my brother."
Lady Anice laughed shortly at the quiet reply.
"A new brother just found; your affections take root easily."

"Yes, and they stay till the end, Lady Anice; believe me, I am no vane."

Lady Anice bit her lip and frowned.
What did the girl mean. Was it a hint that she saw the flagrant flirtation that was progressing between the Prince de Bonies and her brother's wife? Anice felt nervous for a moment; she did not wish any domestic wrath to come and spoil her pleasure.

"Nor am I," she answered, as she picked a rose and cruelly pulled it to pieces, watching Madge's face as she continued, "Did you mean anything by that remark, Madge?"

Madge flushed. To-day was the very first time her brother's wife had spoken her name or addressed her gently.

"You must remember I have had no such worldly experience to teach me as you, and I have always been a spoilt child," Lady Anice went on, seeing to her satisfaction how easily she could work on this girl's feelings. "Very, very often I am afraid I appear heartless. Now confess, don't I?"

Madge sighed.
"I have no right to judge you; but oh! Anice, I beseech you, don't play with Keith's feelings. Perhaps he does love you more than you do him, but be patient with him, and don't give him more pain than you can help."

Lady Anice threw away her rose-leaves.

"Has Keith been complaining to you?" she asked, with a smile that was very forced.

"No—no—indeed he has not. Keith is too proud to speak of such a thing, even to me, his sister. I judge him by his face."

"I must look at it when I return; perhaps I shall learn from it," Anice laughed, shortly. "Au revoir, don't work too hard, and come down to dinner to night; you must be dull alone."

A frown gathered on her face as she walked away; she longed at that instant to strike Madge, who had dared to hint even that she caused Keith pain.

"He is a sentimental fool," she thought, violently. "Good Heavens, I can't stand this sort of thing very long. I shall have to speak a few plain words and tell him the truth, that I never cared a halfpenny for him, and that he bores me."

Madge stood gazing after her.
"Have I done good?" she sighed, "I hope so. She spoke almost kindly, and yet—yet I mistrust her."

She went on with her work, thinking of her brother sadly, and of Rex with a thrill of passionate tenderness.

"If I could see him once more," she said to herself, "he would comfort me."

Then glancing away in the distance she saw her brother's tall, handsome form with the fairy, dainty one of Lady Anice nestling almost fondly to his arm.

"Yes, I have done good after all," she thought; "perhaps she is only thoughtless, not heartless, as I have grown to think her. Heaven grant it for Keith's sake. How he loves her. His face positively beams as though all the clouds were gone just because she smiles on him."

It was true. Sir Keith had met his wife just as she was moving away from Madge, and with that coquetry that was so easy to her she had succeeded in banishing for the time all doubt and pain from his heart.

Worldly wisdom urged her to this course; she had no desire to have an open quarrel with her husband, especially just at the present moment, so she drifted back to her old self, though her thoughts were very far from being pleasant ones towards him.

Madge determined to meet Anice in her new mood, so clothed herself in one of the many handsome black dresses Sir Keith had given her; and looking an angel of purity in her soft widow's cap, descended to the drawing-room for dinner that night.

She was welcomed most warmly by one and all, though Lady Anice frowned, as she saw the

admiration produced by her sister-in-law's undoubted loveliness.

As Madge stood at one of the windows the Prince de Bonies approached her.

"You remind me of the poet's lines, madam," he murmured, in a low whisper.

"Oh! thou art fairer than the evening air,
Old in the beauty of a thousand stars."

Madge looked at him keenly.

"I am not used to compliments, your highness," she replied, distinctly; "nor do I like them."

He drew back and bowed, though he wore an air of vexation.

"I forgot," he said, softly, "I will not offend again."

He leaned back against the window and contemplated her sweet fair face with a look of such ardent admiration that Madge blushed beneath his dark passionate eyes.

The gong sounding came as a pleasant relief. But the relief was short lived.

"Mine is the happiness," said the Prince, and he held out his arm with another bow.

She took it reluctantly.

"Why are you so cold and silent to me?" he asked, as they were seated at the table.

Madge was silent. She was no socialist; from the first she had disliked this man—nay, strange as it may seem, she even regarded him with dread.

The Prince watched her carefully and eagerly from beneath his dark eyelashes.

"I see," he went on, softly, "you are no dissembler. You do not like me, madam; I am unfortunate, but let me try to win your regard. Tell me how can I hope to become your friend?"

Madge smiled faintly.

"I am chary in making new friends, Prince, I cling to my old too well."

"By Heaven, she is lovelier than the stars," was the muttered thought in the man's breast.

"But," went on the girl, feeling that she had been almost discourteous, "if you care to be a good acquaintance of mine, I beg you to discard the compliments with which you have hitherto garnished your conversation to me."

"You command, I obey."

And thereupon he began to discuss things in general. His voice was pleasant and musical; he was well read, well versed in art. Gradually they got deep in an argument, in which, despite herself, Madge found an attraction in this man, and she chatted easily, heedless of the smile on the Countess de Ganyani's face, or the frown on Lady Anice's.

The jealousy and wrath of the latter at this moment fanned into life the dormant love that had been awakened at last in Anice Moretown's selfish heart.

As she had tortured many a man, so now did she suffer as she saw the Prince lost to everything but Madge, and knew that she had no power to alter this.

Madge was pained beyond words at her coolness in the drawing-room, but sat listening to Blanche Ganyani's girlish chatter, and tried to forget her sister-in-law's pointed rudeness.

She was not destined to retire that night without further pain.

When the men came in, with one accord they all entreated her to sing.

The Prince was the most impressive.

"As a reward for my good conduct," he pleaded, and so Madge consented.

"Will you play my accompaniment?" she asked Blanche.

The Countess's daughter rose at once.

"I must first take off my bangles, they rattle so," she said, as she seated herself.

Madge idly took up one of the ornaments, a gold band, with a sapphire and diamonds sunk in it.

"How pretty!" she exclaimed.

A deep blush dyed Blanche Ganyani's face, and her mother, who was near, laughed softly.

"That! Yes, it is pretty," Blanche replied.

"Rex Darnley sent that to me just before he started with Lord Vivian."

"And you would sooner lose your eyes than that bangle, eh, Blanche?" laughed the Countess.

An icy hand seemed to close over Madge's heart. She clasped the bracelet between fingers that burned with the sudden pain she endured, then by one mighty effort she put it down, and turned over a page of the music-book.

"I will sing this," she said, clearly.

"Delightful! I have longed to hear you, dear Mrs. Watson," exclaimed the Countess, blandly. "Rex has spoken of you to us so much—has he not, Blanche?"

Madge saw the girl's face flush again.

"Yes, mamma," was all she said, but the hesitation, the blush, was enough for Madge.

"False! Rex false too! Oh, Heaven, I can't believe it!" was the cry of her heart, as Blanche played the prelude to her song.

Then calling up her pride she opened her lips and sang—sang with a wall of pathos, a depth, a sweetness that had never come to her before.

A hushed murmur of applause followed, in which the Countess's voice was loudest, and Madge moved away from the piano, and stood at an open window to let the cool breeze play on her hot eyes, and freshen her fainting spirit.

"False! Rex false!"

The hideous meaning of the words rang tumultuously in her ears. She put one slender hand on the oaken window-ledge to support herself, experiencing at this moment a return of the old bitterness she had felt so often in the past.

"If it be true," ran her thoughts, "if he should love her, how shall I bear it? What shall I do? Rex, if I could only see you, ask you, believe me, if it were for your happiness I would sacrifice my own; but you are silent, you do not send me even one line!"

She sighed a short, quick sigh; and then, as the remembrance of Blanche's confusion and blush returned, she felt that her fear, her pain, must indeed be real.

"Henceforth," she said, bitterly to herself, "I will trust no man, believe in no one. I would as soon have dreamed nature a fraud as that Rex was false."

A shiver passed over her, her eyes closed. She heard the babble of voices from the room in a dull, confused way, and then she was conscious that someone was standing beside her, fanning her gently.

"You are better!" asked Prince de Bonies, very gently.

He stood so that no one could see the girl's pale face.

"I was just coming to speak to you, and saw in an instant you were ill. You are better now?"

"Yes; the heat tired me, that was all."

He continued fanning her, and Madge could not but recognise the delicacy and kindness that prompted him to shield her from the many inquisitive eyes around.

"You are very kind," she murmured.

"It has been exceptionally sultry to-day, madam," was the reply given.

But as he gazed at the sweet, troubled face, the Italian's heart beat fast.

"It is no heat that caused her to faint. I saw her wince at that man's name. Ah! but my dainty Anice is clever, and the girl's confusion was turned to a nicety. How she must love him! *Sapristi!* he is to be envied, this cold, sneering Englishman. I have never met a woman I could love as I could this one."

Ignorant of the current of thought running in his breast Madge smiled at him.

"I see you are determined to win my friendship, Prince!" she said, gently.

"I desire nothing better than to serve you, when you can bring yourself to trust me, madam."

"Do you believe in friendship?"

The man smiled at the sudden question.

"I am afraid I believe in nothing; but, then, I have seen life!"

"And nothing lasts!"

"Nothing lasts. Human love is like a flower, picked to-day, dead before night. You may try to revive it how you will; it never returns to its former self."

In her present mood this philosophy fitted Madge too well.

"It is said," she said, bitterly.

"All truths are said."

The Prince shut the fan, and leaned back against the opposite corner of the window.

Each moment that he spoke to this girl was as fuel to the flame of passionate love raging in his heart—love such as he had never felt before; it was so strong and pure.

Before either could speak again the Countess de Ganyani swept up to them.

"Dear Mrs. Watson," she said, sweetly, laying one jewelled hand on Madge's shoulder, "I bring a petition; will you sing again?"

"The night is so hot, it may fatigue you," broke in the Prince, hurriedly.

Madge felt that the woman's dark eyes were searching her through and through. Had she consulted her own feelings she would have refused and left the crowd for her own room and the misery of her thoughts, but her pride was powerful; her delicate nature shrank from giving this woman even a clue to her real feelings.

"With pleasure. I am rested now, thank you. Perhaps Mella Ganyani will accompany me again."

And with a smile to the Prince she left them.

As they stood alone the face of the Countess changed.

"What is the meaning of this tomfoolery?" she asked, swiftly.

"What tomfoolery?"

"You know what I mean. This was not in our bargain. Why are you not by Lady Anice's side?"

"She bores me."

The Countess stamped her foot.

"Beware, Paul; remember all you owe to me. Draw back from your promise now, and I expose you to—well, to those whom even your strong nature may shrink from meeting. It will be a question of cold steel then, *mon ami*."

The Prince shivered slightly.

"I have forgotten nothing," he said, gloomily, "nor am I going back from my bargain."

"Then, why stand gaping at that girl as though you loved her beyond anything this world holds? Do you not see how angry our dear hostess looks?"

There certainly was a shade of ill-temper on Lady Anice's face.

The Prince smiled.

"I thought a little jealousy a good ingredient to introduce about now."

The woman glanced at him swiftly, and then laughed softly.

"You understand now?" he asked.

"Thoroughly. I ask your pardon, Paul. I should have remembered your usual cunning."

"I am afraid, Hé ône, I shall never instil any confidence in you."

"My jef, no. I trust no one; but come, we must not stand here longer. Go to Lady Anice; waste no more time. I am hungry for my revenge, Paul. I shall be happy when I see Keith Moretown a man without a hope or joy in life left. Then he will perhaps repent his boyish insolence to me, and the triumph he held at that time."

"And the sister—what of her? Is she to be included in this revenge?"

The Prince stroked his moustache, and spoke almost indifferently.

The Countess de Ganyani smiled.

"Blanche must marry Rex Darnley," was all she said, as she swept her silken train away.

The man stood silent for a few minutes in the window niche.

"Curse the day I got in her power," he mused, savagely. "She is a hard-task mistress, never so loathsome to me as now that my heart is full of love for this sweet girl."

He turned his eyes out on to the moonlit sword, and listened to Madge's tender voice, then, as it ended, he shook himself.

"Basta!" he said, inwardly; "after all I am a fool. Hé ône can denounce me to the secret council, and then—well, my life is not worth an hour's purchase. Things are not so bad, and I suppose I ought to feel honoured at the very

open preference shown towards me by my hostess. A little more skillful management, and if I mistake not, the fair Anice will come to my hand when I whistle for her, despite her callous, selfish heart!"

And with this reflection the Prince de Boules sauntered slowly across the room to the side of his host's wife, whose pretty face showed the pleasure which his presence brought.

"Is Sir Keith blind or mad?" whispered one lady guest to another.

Sir Keith was neither, but he possessed as yet boundless belief in his wife's purity and innocence, and so saw nothing of what was so apparent to all in his house.

Madge after her second song made a quiet escape; she could endure it no longer. The sight of that bangle with its flashing jewels seemed to mock at her misery. She went slowly up the stairs till she reached her own room.

Once there she sank on her knees by the open window and gazed into the clear, translucent sky, glittering with its gem-like stars.

"Nothing lasts! Ah! yes, yes! My love for you, Rex, will last for ever. Though you may, must have grown weary of me, I shall never weary of you. The memory of the love you once gave me, dear, will be all I shall have. Still nothing will change; I am yours till death!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE was a corridor in Moretown Hall that ran off the picture-gallery to a disused part of the building. It was seldom traversed, even by the servants, as the rooms at the end were only used for lumber, and the accumulation of old-fashioned furniture and articles that had been removed and replaced by the modern beautiful things when Sir Keith prepared his home for his wife.

Madge had, indeed, never seen this part of the house, though as a young child she must have known it well, but since she returned she had confined herself to her own room, her brother's study, and the various apartments which owed their floral decoration to her hands.

On the very morning of the theatricals, however, an opportunity came.

A theatrical costumer had been summoned from London to attend to the dresses, and everything was in the hands of a capable stage-manager; but at the last rehearsal it was found necessary to change some of the scenery in one of the acts, and a cry for curtains was raised.

The housekeeper was sent for and she came to Madge.

"I know there are any number of curtains in the west wing, Mrs. Watson," she said; "but my master has the key, and I don't think he is in the house."

"I will go to his study; I think I know where the keys are, and will relieve you of this task, Mrs. Bailey."

"Thank you, madam," was the grateful reply; "for my hands are full to-day, I won't deny it."

Madge smiled and ran downstairs.

"Ah! she's very different to my lady," was the housekeeper's reflection. "Bless her for her sweet, lovely face; always a kind thought and word for everybody."

Her brother was nowhere to be found, but Madge remembered to have seen the keys required in his study, so she went direct there and got them.

The hall was a mass of confusion; guests were running hither and thither, while from the ball-room, turned for the nonce into a theatre, a mingled sound of music and hammering was caught.

Madge, despite her pain and troubled heart, exerted herself to do all in her power to make the entertainment a success. As she passed through the hall to the staircase the Countess de Ganyani met her.

"Where are you off to so badly?" she asked.

The girl explained briefly.

A strange look flashed for an instant in the old woman's eyes.

"May I accompany you?" she asked. "I have a fancy to see those old rooms once again. Ah, me! how long it seems since your dear, dead father conducted me so proudly over my new home."

Madge shivered, but did not reply, and so the Countess turned and mounted the staircase with her.

"How sweet and good you are!" she observed as they progressed. "Ah, Madge! how I wish my Blanche could be with you always. Your influence would be so beneficial to her in her future life."

"You overrate my qualities," replied Madge faintly, but coldly.

"Oh! no, indeed, no."

Madge said nothing more, and they walked through the picture-gallery in silence.

As they reached the door of the corridor Madge saw to her surprise that it was unlocked, and as she pulled it open she drew back in surprise and horror.

There before her stood her brother's wife, and kneeling at her feet, kissing her hand, was the Prince de Boules.

A mist fell over Madge's eyes, but the Countess laughed merrily.

"Always rehearsing, you two!" she cried, as Lady Anice snatched her hands quickly from her lover's hold. "Have you not got that scene perfect yet?"

"Very nearly."

The Prince rose leisurely from his knees as he spoke.

"Very nearly, but Lady Anice was a little nervous about to-night, and so as we could not find a secluded spot we came here."

"Yes," chimed in Lady Anice, with forced ease, "and even here we are not secluded, it seems."

"We shall be gone directly, and then you may rehearse as much as you will. What a fortunate thing we understood—ah, Madge! The situation was so ridiculously compromising."

Madge gazed straight into the Countess's treacherous eyes.

"It is a subject I prefer not to jest upon, madam," was all she said, and then she passed on to the door of the room in which the housekeeper had told her to find the curtains.

"Is Keith downstairs, Madge?" her sister-in-law cried after her.

She stopped.

"No; I do not think he is in."

Lady Anice made a move as she disappeared into the room.

"Oh!" was her muttered thought—to the Prince she said carelessly,—

"We had better go down now—we must find a few minutes this afternoon."

"When and where you will," was his reply, and laughing easily they both left the corridor.

Madge picked out the curtains with a heart that was oppressed and wretched.

Doubt, dread, an intuition of coming sorrow hung over her.

She tried to think that what the Countess had said was true, and that after all the scene she had witnessed had been but a mimic one of stage love or declaration, but the thought would come that she had been deceived, that there was some secret plot at work against her brother's honour and happiness.

"And I can do nothing," she said, sorrowfully to herself, as she went downstairs to tell one of the servants to fetch the curtains. "I have no proof, only this hideous distrust and suspicion. Heaven help Keith if it should be true!"

Even her own misery was pushed on one side. She was haunted all through that day by the image of Keith's broken-hearted face and life ruined by a coquette's treachery. Do what she would she could not beat down the convictions that were proclaiming Anice false and wicked.

"May I be forgiven if I doubt her wrongly," she prayed, sadly, as she dressed for the festival, feeling the while that a storm hung over her head ready to burst at any moment, "but they are all so deceitful. What can Keith hope, with his frank, truthful honesty against such people?"

It was with the first sensation of pleasure she



"DEAR MRS. WATSON," SHE SAID, SWEETLY, "WILL YOU SING AGAIN?"

had experienced for a long time that she saw Lord Danmoor when she descended to the salon.

"I am so glad to see you!" she said, as they clasped hands, "so glad."

Lord Danmoor's plain face flushed with delight, though he knew she spoke from friendship, not affection.

"Well, I thought I must turn up for this entertainment. Ah! here is Keith."

Madge looked anxiously at her brother's face as he shook hands with his new and welcome guest, and sighed with relief as she read its clear and pleased expression, which relief was deepened as Lady Anice flitted downstairs and greeted her brother most warmly, and then nestled to her husband's side.

"She cannot be such a hypocrite," thought Madge. "She loves him after all!"

If she could have gazed into Lady Anice's heart, and seen the tumults of immoral love, passion, and hatred that dwelt there, she would have shrunk back shuddering.

"I have grown bitter," she mused, sadly. "I think good of no one since Rex deceived me."

Lt. Rex Darnley guessed the agony that was torturing his treasured love. He had refrained from writing to her from motives of delicacy alone, and this Madge had understood until, like the sting of the serpent, the words of the Countess and her daughter had rankled in her breast, and turned her peace and simple content to misery.

The theatricals were pronounced a great success. Madge did not go in to see them. She preferred the cool evening air in the garden, and she had had too much theatrical food in her young life to seek it now.

Thus she was spared the pain of discovering her sister-in-law's decoit to be only too true, for she would have seen that throughout the whole performance Lady Anice and the Prince were never once in the position of stage lovers, and that their excuse had been a lie.

The entertainment lasted two nights, and after then a few of the guests melted away. Madge

watched anxiously to see the Countess, Blanche, and the Prince disappear, but they seemed to have no desire to quit their most comfortable quarters.

Lord Danmoor was exceedingly wrath with his sister when he learnt who the woman was she so delighted to honour.

"You are selfish and wicked, as of old, Anice," he said, as he relinquished the effort of expostulating with her.

"If you do not care to see me why do you come?" she retorted.

"I come because I care too much for Keith to neglect him entirely."

"Leave Keith alone; he is very well."

Lady Anice tossed a match into the empty grate as she spoke. She had just lit a cigarette, and put it nonchalantly between her pretty lips.

"Anice, your husband is a changed man since your marriage."

"Is he?" she yawned, and began to open a book.

"You have not the usual mass of selfishness and indifference to deal with in Keith Moretown. He believes in you still, Anice; but when he knows you for what you are his heart will break."

"Oh, bah! Do go away, for Heaven's sake, Danmoor; you do no nothing but sermonise till I am half asleep. Go and talk to that prig, Madge; she will suit you."

"Anice"—Lord Danmoor spoke seriously—"it is your duty to get rid of this woman, her daughter, and her theatrical princely friend as soon as you can."

Lady Anice's delicate face grew crimson with anger. This of the man she had grown to love better than herself! It maddened her.

"Leave my house!" she exclaimed, in a voice choked with passion. "I will not be insulted by you. They are my friends now and always."

Lord Danmoor gazed at her in grave silence.

"I pity you, Anice," was all he said; and he turned away.

Lady Anice had spoken in truth when she told her brother she wished him gone. She was growing reckless. Love for Prince de Boules was now the acme of her existence. She was in no mood to listen to reproaches or receive advice.

Madge never spoke to her now; and, indeed, the conversation was forced and uncomfortable when the whole party met for lunch or dinner.

It was torture to Madge to meet day after day the girl who was to be Rex Darnley's wife; and the vague suspicions called up that day in the old corridor would linger when she gazed from Lady Anice to the Prince. She could not rid her mind of the feeling that they were on the verge of some calamity, some hideous storm, that would shatter the calm serenity of their lives by its fury.

One night, about a week after the theatricals, the storm came.

Sir Keith had had occasion earlier in the day to ride over to a neighbouring town about some important business. Madge saw him mount, and bade him good-bye with a strange pain at her heart; but she dismissed this as foolish and weak as soon as he was gone.

The day passed much as usual. Since Lord Danmoor had returned Madge had not been so lonely, though not even to him could she bring her lips to utter the name of the man she loved so bitterly and so dearly.

The night was lovely; a silver moon rode in the dark blue heavens. When Madge went to her room she had no wish to sleep. She drew a chair up to the open window, and sat down to think over that past brief dream of joy, those moments when Rex had seemed to love her so passionately, so tenderly.

An hour passed in this quiet meditation; and she was rising with a sigh when her door was suddenly thrust open, and before she could utter a sound Sir Keith strode in.

"Madge," he said, in thick, husky tones, "where is Anice?"

(To be continued.)



"LIFE IS SO HARD!" NELL SAID, FAINTLY.

VERNON'S DESTINY.

CHAPTER XIX

GUY VERNON may have many years to live, but to his life's end he can never forget that moment. Every feature of the scene will stand out before his mind with vivid distinctness, and when the silver threads are scattered amid his dark hair, and Time's wrinkles line his face.

He had rushed to Riversdale on impulse, had travelled over a hundred and fifty miles—to a place whose name even he had never heard before—on the bidding of a dream. He almost laughed at his own folly when he reached the little village and found how small and remote it was—just a tranquil English hamlet, a dozen cottages or so, a straggling, irregular street, a public-house, and general shop.

Guy might have returned to London in disdain but for two things. One—this he tried to convince himself was his sole reason for remaining; the quiet and seclusion were just what he needed for his literary toils which had been just a little neglected in London.

The August weather was unusually trying in the metropolis, and Guy did not see why he should hurry back to Cecil-street, Strand. Mr. Ashwin had his address (the only person who had), and would certainly communicate with him, if the search for his missing cousin required his personal aid. Why should he not enjoy cool country breezes and immunity from interruption? This was one reason for his prolonged stay at Riversdale; the other, and by far the stronger one, he never admitted even to himself. He felt in some strange, mysterious manner nearer to Helen Charteris.

He was not a superstitious man; besides, even if he had believed in ghosts since he hoped Helen was alive, he could not have credited her spirit with haunting him. All his life he had mocked at spiritualism; he would have scorned to con-

feess his sensations; but from the moment he took up his abode at the little village inn he seemed to realise that he was in actual communion with the girl he loved.

For he knew the truth now!—nay, he had known it ever since Mrs. Charteris told him of Mr. Denzell's marriage. The girl he had found crying in the country lane, the girl he had spoken to in all not three times, of whom he had tried to persuade himself he held a very bad opinion, was yet the one love of his life. She was the one creature who could have taken root in his heart and flourished there; the one wife who would have made his life a success, his house a home.

And she was given to Reginald Denzell—this woman with the wistful smile, the clear truthful eyes, the pure mobile expression, was wife to a man utterly incapable of understanding or appreciating her. Guy writhed whenever he thought of it, and yet he never tried to remedy the matter by banishing it from his thoughts. As a practical man, he admitted perfectly there was no house in Riversdale suited to receive Mrs. Denzell as an inmate. He went even further and confessed to himself there was no single attraction in the place that could possibly bring it the honour of a visit from her, and yet he stayed on from day to day because he felt confident she would surely come.

He never imagined the manner of her coming. He never bewildered himself by wondering whether she would be with her husband or alone; only he was sure she would come.

He had never even heard of Riversdale until he dreamed he saw Nell there rushing to her death. That dream could not have been a chance, or why did he feel near her the moment he set foot in the sleepy village?

Once, and once only, he had planned to leave it. Three days after his arrival he had been stricken with self-ridicule for the faith he knew all his friends would scoff at. He had gone so far as to pack his bag, and to intimate to the landlord he

should need a fly to take him to the Gloucester station in the morning.

And the result. He had hardly closed his eyes that night when Nell's face appeared before him, and her sad, reproachful voice sounded in his ears with one single word of mingled entreaty, reproach, and command,—

"Wait!"

Don't despise my word when I tell you, the next morning he countermanded the fly, repacked his bag, sent to Gloucester for writing materials, and settled down for an indefinite sojourn at the village inn, and he had been there now getting on for four weeks.

It was not his wont to go out before breakfast; but something in the extraordinary beauty of the September morning tempted him postponing his first meal for half an hour.

He took his hat, and started for a ramble by the river's banks. He was in time to hear the words repeated which had caught his ear first in his dream in Cecil-street; in time to put one hand on Nell's arm, and save her from a suicide's end.

"Nell!"

"Guy!"

They had never called each other by the simple Christian name, Helen especially, had always, even in her thoughts, styled the knight of the hyacinths "Sir Guy"; but as they stood there, looking into each other's eyes, the simple greeting seemed rung from their very hearts.

"Guy!"

"Nell!"

Then the woman remembered. It seems to me that stings of memory, of remorse, always do attack the woman first, just as her sense of joy and sorrow is keener and more sensitive than a man's; so the pang of self-reproach assailed her before he is even conscious of their approach.

"What must you think of me?"

He did not tell her—he could not. A passionate profession of love hovered on his lips; but he drove it bravely back. She was alone, and in trouble. He would not add to her trouble.

She misunderstood his silence, and imagined he blamed her for the crime he had prevented. "I could not help it," she said, faintly—and, oh! how the weariness of her sweet voice went to Gay's heart—"I could not help it. I know it was wrong; but life is so hard!"

"My poor child!"

"If only I had known," she whispered, with a look of anguish in her eyes—"if only I had known his true name; but, you see, I believed he was Mr. Travers until—it was too late!"

"And you are not angry with me for having warned you against him?"

"Angry!"

"And you know now why I so disliked Isola Marton?"

Nell blushed.

"Aye, I thought then you had been her lover, and rejected."

He smiled. He could not help it.

"Her hater, rather!"

A silence. They were close together these two. Her black dress almost swept his knees, and yet he made no attempt to take her hand. After that one grasp which drew her from her danger Sir Guy sought no contact with Nell. They just stood there together—those two who were so near, and yet so far.

"You must never do it again, Nell! Child. Has he made your life such torture that at your age you seek to yield it up?"

She bowed her head.

"I know it was wrong; but it would have hurt no one but me. Oh, why did you stop me! He is in Gloucester by now, and when he hears I have left there he will be on my track! Oh, why did you stop me!"

"Because his cruelty shall not lead you to sin; because for his faults you shall not stain your fair soul with so dark a stain as murder! Child, I am years older than you; can't you tell me how all this came about?"

"How I married him?"

"Yes. Even supposing him Reginald Travers. I am sure that you never loved him."

"Oh, no!"

"And you were not one to marry without love. Is it a mystery to me?"

Nell told her story, much as he knew it already—told it down to the time of her arrival at Charteris; of the weeks since that; of the little life so swiftly ended she said nothing.

"And when did you come here?" She told him the date of her reaching Gloucester. Gay started. It was the night of his dream.

"Nell, you have been cruelly deceived," he said at last. "Major Marton is now abroad, but said, for certain, he would have asked nothing better than to welcome you back to his home. I have it from Lillian Forrester's own lips that Mrs. Hamilton mourned over your silence; her telegram, like the Major's cruelty, never existed, save in Mr. Denzil's invention."

"I know," said Nell, simply; "you need not tell me. I know where he is, and I have fled from him. Since the end of January my life has been one long attempt at concealment. I have never known a day without fear of discovery!"

"Poor child!"

"I often think," said the girl, slowly, "that wicked people are the best off!"

"Don't talk like that, child, for Heaven's sake; you cut me to the heart."

"But it's true!" persisted Nell. "If only I were bad, or like him, I shouldn't mind his being what he is; and now I would rather beg my bread from door to door than see him!"

"Nell, you must be freed from him."

"I can't."

"You mean you shrink from the publicity of a divorce?"

"I could not get one."

"Nell!"

"I never thought of such things till now. My life was so wretched. I was ready to catch at any chance of freedom. I had heard of divorces and separations, and made up my mind to try for one."

"You would get it."

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"The law would take no notice of how I was led to marry him."

"But—"

"And I can bring no charge against him since our marriage. He has not been cruel to me; he has not starved or deserted me; he is ready and anxious to provide me with a home suited to our position; the law will deem him a model husband. True, his fraud has wrecked my life, his deceit has broken my heart; and knowing him for what he is, I would pierce my breast with a knife, and die at his feet, rather than return to him. But there, what is that to the law! It might take notice of broken limbs or a starving home; but a broken heart and ruined hopes are beyond its province."

It was true every word of it, Gay knew. He had heard Nell's story, and he realised dimly that no court of justice would free her from her husband's yoke. Mr. Denzil had carefully kept aloof from any offence against the law.

"That is why I think wicked people have the best of it," went on Nell, slowly. "If only I were bad I should be better off."

She meant that if only she were of the same coarse mould; if only she had the same evil passions as her husband, she might have lived with him in peace, since it was no physical discomfort or suffering she had to fear; but her words suggested a very different meaning to the man beside her.

"Well, do you know I am not the rich man I seem; that instead of being master of Vernon Grange and its thousands I am master of nowhere and four hundred a year."

"I am sorry."

"And I am glad."

"Why?"

"It makes what I want to tell you easier, Nell, do you know I love you?"

"I never thought of it."

"Do you love me?"

The scales fell from her eyes now, she knew the truth at last; she loved her dreamland hero as her very soul. If Reginald Denzil had been a paragon instead of a very black sheep, he would yet have failed to win his wife's heart, for, unknown to herself, ever since she met him her love had been given to Sir Guy.

"Nell, do you love me?"

"Oh! hush."

He looked up into the clear blue sky, and then into the eyes which matched it in colour and purity. There was a strange hushiness in his voice as he began, but it cleared and grew stronger as he went on.

"Nell, this is no time for conventionalities or subterfuge; you must be pretty miserable. That man must have wrecked your life pretty thoroughly or you would not at your age contemplate a suicide's grave. Child, you give me a plain answer to my question—do you love me?"

She knew he meant to have his answer; there was no shade of coquetry in Nell's nature. She replied simply, and without a blush. She knew how hopeless was the love she owned to, and yet at this supreme moment she could not deny it.

"Yes."

It was the answer he had expected; he had read it in her eyes before her lips gave it. He stood there for one moment in silence, then he took the girl's trembling fingers in his hand, almost crushing them in his vice-like clasp.

"Nell, we love each other, you and I. In all this world only one creature can be wronged by our belonging to each other. What is the man the law calls your husband that our happiness should be sacrificed to him?"

Nell trembled.

"He is my husband!"

"He owes the relationship to a fraud; but for a false name, but for a clever tissue of lies, you would never have married him."

"Never!"

"And he has made you wretched!"

"Yes."

"Then, Nell, I say that your vows to him can't be binding on you, that you are as free in Heaven's sight as though you had never stood with him in a church, and sworn to be his wife."

She did not answer him—she could not. One

hand was pressed against her heart, as though to still its throbs. She began to understand it all; that dream of long ago.

The ship was the world. The danger, indeed, threatened only her. The danger of being found by Reginald Denzil, and forced to return to his protection, that was the "shipwreck" that had seemed so fearful; and here was Gay Vernon offering to effect her escape, holding out to her a rope of white hyacinths, or pleasures; but to grasp what he offered her, just as in the dream, she must trample on her marriage vows, or upon a plain gold ring.

Her silence irritated Gay.

"You owe him no duty, no consideration!" he went on, fiercely. "He will have what tempted him to persecute you into wedding him—your fortune. Let him keep it. I have no great wealth to offer you; but I can give you a heart which will love you while it beats, and I will work with all my strength to give you a home worthy your birth."

"Don't!" she gasped, faintly; "don't talk like that!"

"I must! Nell, don't you see, won't you understand, that man has no real claim on you! The law may be on his side; but in Heaven's sight, in the eyes of all right-minded people, you would be mine."

Nell trembled.

"And you love me?"

"I love you with every fibre of my heart. Child, you cannot put from you devotion such as mine! I will stand between you and every sorrow; you shall never know a grief. I only ask for your love to be the sunbeam of my life!"

"I love you!" said Helen Charteris. "It is wrong, I know; but I can't help it."

"It is not wrong. Nell, you loved me before ever you gave yourself to him. In my idea you are my wife, not his!"

"Oh, hush!"

"Do you doubt my love? Do you think I would not be as sure and faithful to you as though you were a dozen times my wedded wife?"

The girl looked up at the clear blue sky, and thought of the little child waiting for her up there. She knew she was giving up every chance of happiness to her life. She knew, and this hurt her even more, she was blighting the future of the man she loved; but the thought of little Hyacinth spurred her for the effort.

When Nell's eyes came down to earth again her choice was made, her sacrifice determined.

"I know you love me," she said to Gay Vernon, looking into his eyes with a wondrous light in her own. "I am quite sure of it, and by that love I ask you to do one thing for me."

"A hundred!"

"I only ask one. Promise me I shall not ask in vain!"

"I promise."

He could not understand the agony written on her face. He had no idea of what was threatening him.

"Up there!" said Nell, and her eyes turned once more with their burden of sorrow to the azure sky. "Up there, waiting for me, is a little child! Guy, you have promised me my boon! I ask that you will help me so to live and so to die that I may not shrink from meeting my dead baby's angel face!"

"Nell!"

"I cannot let you stain your noble soul with guilt for me," she whispered. "You shall not bear this disgrace for me. Besides, you have promised that little Hyacinth's mother shall do nothing to make her unworthy of her child."

"A baby who breathed and died! to sacrifice our lives to her! Oh, Nell!"

"Not to her," corrected Nell; but to all that is right and brave and pure. Guy, would our love for each other bear that fearful strain that you would put upon it? You have a mother—would you make her unhappy? Your love has sweetened the bitterest day in my life! I must try so to live that you never think the affection you would have poured out on me given to one unworthy. The memory of what might have been will cheer my lonely life; and in time

to come when you are happy I can rejoice in your gladness."

"I shall never be happy without you, Nell. You are sacrificing us both to a mere feeling—a sentiment."

"You will not say so always! Gay, I feel I cannot bear this much longer! I am sinking—hold me!"

In a moment the strong arm was round her. Oh, that it might have been her support for life!

"Now, tell me how I can help you!" said Gay, when he had astonished the landlady of the village inn by bringing an unexpected guest into breakfast, and coffee and toast had brought a faint pink flush back to Nell's cheeks.

She knew by the very tone of his voice that the crisis was past. A deep thankfulness filled her heart.

"Remember, I never mean to lose sight of you again!" went on Sir Guy, gently. "I regard your future as my special care! Will you let me be your ambassador, and come to some settled terms with your husband?"

"No, oh, no!"

"Will you go your own relations? I know Lord Charteris and his family well, and I am certain they would receive you!"

She shook her head.

"When I met you this morning—but for an accident which deprived me of the means—I should have been in London."

"You have friends there?"

"I have no friends there; but someone told me once—it was a girl who sold flowers—of a home, not far from London, where young women were taken to train as nurses; but for the loss I mentioned I should have gone to this home to-day!"

"You, a hospital nurse! You with your beauty and childish ways!"

"I have suffered too much ever to be a child again; for the rest, it is the life of all others I should prefer, if only they did not think me unworthy."

"They'd better not dare to! Helen, I shall take you there myself! It's no use, talking! Surely, if your conscience demands that you make my life lonely, I may have the small satisfaction of knowing you are safe from want and discomfort!"

So Mrs. Denzell went to London, but in far otherwise than she had imagined. At the very moment when that stormy interview between Mr. Denzell and poor Lady Maude was interrupted by the party from the Rosary, Nell and her knight passed through Gloucester station in the luxury of a reserved first-class carriage.

"You are sure of the address?"

Nell was not sure, but had a belief it was near Hammersmith. A directory at a stationer's in Paddington proved helpful, and Sir Guy and the girl he would so gladly have made his own reached a quaint, rather monastic-looking building, not much after three o'clock.

"We will have no concealments!" whispered Gay. "If I am to leave you here I must arrange things as I choose with your temporary protectress!" and then he sent into the Lady Superior a card, with his full name inscribed.

He and Helen were not kept long waiting before a very old lady, with a sweet peaceful face and soft white hair came in. The moment she came within sight of Nell her whole face changed; she grew first grave, then sad, and two tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," she said, taking the girl's hand in her own and kissing her. "The resemblance to my dear friend almost overcame me; I thought for the moment, forgetting the lapse of time, that she stood before me. Of course, I understand now that you are her daughter."

Nell was bewildered; Gay answered for her. "Madam, we had no such hope as to find a friend by inheritance in coming here. I called to ask your care and kindness for this young lady."

But the Superior would not listen.

"She must be Magdalen's daughter," declared the old lady; "the resemblance is too strong to

be accidental. It must be more than twenty years since Magdalen left us to marry Major Charteris, and, of course, this is her daughter."

The name was a revelation to Gay; it was his turn to be speechless now.

"I was Helen Charteris until last January," said Nell, sadly. "Then I married, and it turned out a great mistake. Madam, I have done nothing wrong, but I am very, very unhappy. I had hoped to find a refuge here, and that you would have let me join the girls you have as nurses of the sick."

"Magdalen's daughter must be welcome," said the Superior, kindly; "but oh! my child, I am grieved to hear your story; I had wished you a happier fate than your poor mother's. Sir Guy will tell you here was sad enough."

"Sir Guy! He never knew my mother."

"But he bears the same name."

"My mother's name was Clifford."

"My dear, her first husband was a Mr. Clifford, but there was a flaw in the marriage, and it was not legal; that was the sorrow of her life. She was an exile from home, a widowed childless mother when she came to us. She found peace within these walls, and became one of the most trusted nurses. It was in her professional duties that she met Major Charteris."

"This is wonderful!" cried Gay. Madam, do you know that for months past I have been seeking Magdalen Vernon or the heirs. I have an estate and large fortune I hold in trust for them!"

"I cannot understand the difficulty. Colonel Charteris (I read of his promotion) knew quite well that his wife's true name was Vernon."

"But he has been dead some years."

"Then I can understand it. When Magdalen came to us her name was a source of trouble to her. She was not legally Mrs. Clifford; she could not bear to call herself Vernon. I suggested she should take the name of Brown; it was harmless and common; I could never provoke inquiry! Of course her husband knew the whole truth of her story. For precaution's sake they were married twice, once in the chapel attached to this house by our own chaplain, who died soon after, and afterwards at a Registrar's Office in London, where the bride is simply described as Magdalen Brown. I hold the certificate of the first marriage, signed in full by Magdalen Vernon; and I can show you it this minute. Mrs. Charteris preferred to leave it with me when she went abroad. The secret was not confided to her husband's family, or even to his lawyer—he so feared his wife's sad story becoming public property. However, the fact of her having been a hospital nurse, coming from a charitable home, enraged Lord Charteris, and he would never see her."

"Nell, do that you know you are the mistress of Vernon Grange, and most of my fortune!"

"I could not take it. What good would it do me, Gay?"

Guy did not press the point just then. He bade farewell to Helen. The Superior would have left them alone, but he could not wish the agony of another *tête à tête*. He lingered after she had gone to say a few words to the lady who had known her mother.

"She is my life's love, madam. You will be tender with her, and guard her from her husband; he has done her harm enough!"

"You may trust me to do my best for Magdalen's child; but Sir Guy, is she, indeed, an heiress?"

"She has inherited two fortunes already; and now, as you see, she is the heiress of the Vernons. Madam, it is all nonsense her wanting to be a nurse. If you will only take care of her, and keep her safe from Mr. Denzell, I shall think her home here cheaply purchased by the whole of my fortune."

"We could not take it. Our terms for boarders are mostly fifty pounds a year, but the institution is very poor. If money be really no object I would thankfully accept eighty, and see that she, poor child, wanted nothing."

Guy went away with strangely mingled feelings. He had found the missing heiress; he had rescued Nell from poverty, hardship, eye, and a sinful death. He knew she loved him, and yet—such is the nature of man—pain had a

larger share in his feelings than pleasure as he drove away.

"At least she is safe from him. He will not dare to molest her there, and she has a roof over her head, food and raiment—eye, and kindly words; but think what her life will be! Just that of a caged bird, a cloistered nun, and she a girl of twenty! Oh! the cruel mockery of it all!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE Charteris family, with Mr. Cleghorn's assistance, at last convinced Mr. Denzell that his wife was not concealed on Nurse Edwards's premises.

He went off storming—in a temper the reverse of celestial. Lady Maude packed her things, and returned home with Meg. The little house had grown distasteful to her now "Pearl" was gone.

"She was my own cousin! I am so glad we found her!" said Meg, simply. "Auntie, I would like to put a cross on little Hyacinth's grave!"

"So you shall, dear! That poor young mother, my heart aches for her! Meg, how could she have married that man?"

Life was settling down in its usual groove at Charteris when a letter came to Vic Cottage, bearing the postmark of Charing Cross, and addressed to Lady Maude. It held a few lines, signed "Pearl," and expressing the writer's warmest gratitude for all the kindness shown her. She was well and safe. She hoped that all pressing danger from her husband's seeking her was over.

"Is it, I'm sure!" said Lady Maude, when she had read the letter, and passed it to Meg. "If ever a man looked desperate, and set on his own way, Mr. Denzell was when he left us!"

"I have something to tell you about Reginald Denzell. Aunt Maude, don't say anything against him just now, or you will be sorry for it."

The speaker was Nell Charteris. He had come in through the open window—a newspaper in his hand.

"Well, I'm sure you abused him yourself, Nell, as much as anyone, not three weeks ago, when he was so troublesome to us at Gloucester!" returned Lady Maude.

"He was not one of my friends," said Dr. Charteris; "but yet I would rather not speak against him now! Please read this, or perhaps you have seen the *Times*?"

"Meg has not had time to open it, and I never look at it for myself."

"Ah! Then this will be news to you!"

He held the paper open before her, and pointed to an announcement in the first column. Lady Maude's face was a study as she read it.

"On October the first, suddenly, at Clarges-street, Piccadilly, Reginald Denzell, Esq., aged twenty-nine."

"Dead!"

"Just that, auntie. I have a letter, too, from the Doctor. It was all over a dose of chloral which he took to induce sleep. It seems he suffered from nervous restlessness. They have written to me as his wife's nearest relation. My father being abroad, I shall have to go up and see to the funeral."

"I wish you could find Nell, and bring her home to us."

Dr. Charteris did not find Nell in Clarges-street, but he found one very unwelcome intruder—his own sister-in-law.

Mrs. Merton had been on terms of easy intimacy with Mr. Denzell, and she seemed to think it quite her province to arrange the funeral.

Dr. Charteris was very gentle with her for his wife's sake, but he insisted on her leaving the house, and as she seemed upset and shaken by the sudden death he sent her and her maid off to Beauville to join the Travers' ménage. Here very soon after the news of her husband's death reached her. The Major could not leave Isola penniless, bitterly though she deceived him.

He bequeathed her a thousand a-year, and on that she lives very gaily, if not very happily abroad.

But to return. Within an hour of Mrs. Morton's exodus Gay Vernon's card was brought to Dr. Charteris, who was obliged, perforce, to stay in Charges-street until he had settled matters.

"I thought you had quite deserted us!" was Nell's greeting. "Why did you never answer a card I sent you nearly three weeks ago?"

"To confess the truth, I haven't been in Cecil-street for nearly two months. I'm going to-night, and rather wonder what reception I shall meet with."

"How did you guess I should be here?"

"I thought it probable I should meet you or your father. I have just come from Mrs. Danell!"

"Mrs. Danell?"

Nell's tone was so perturbed; it demanded an explanation. Gay gave it. Gladly thankful from his very heart was he now that Nell had been brave enough to make that sacrifice on a September morning at Riversdale not so very long ago, for now he could meet the scrutiny of Dr. Charteris with perfect ease.

"When your unhappy cousin was forced to leave the protection of Lady Maude she took refuge in an Institution of Nursing Sisters near Hammersmith. She is what I suppose you would call a lady-boarder. The Superior knew and loved her mother, so I am pretty sure she would do her best for the poor girl."

"And I was wondering how she was to be found! Poor girl! what a chequered life she has had! Well, now, I suppose, after all these months of doubt, we shall make acquaintance with our cousin in her own character at last."

"And in a new one, too. Do you know her mother was a Vernon, and Helen Danell is the true heiress of Vernon Grange, which all the world has so long called mine! I shall yield it all to her so soon as the first shock of her release has worn off, and she is calm enough to understand business matters."

"We really must not call her 'poor' any longer. Why, she will be the richest heiress in England!"

"But how she has suffered!"

"Aye. Just twenty, and yet a widowed wife, a childless mother! Poor girl, here has been a sad springtime! Heaven grant the summer may be fairer!"

"Amen!"

Helen Danell had a long, long illness when the reaction after those months of anxious fears set in. For weeks she hovered between life and death, then the good nursing Sisters could not bear to part with her until she was quite strong.

So the old year had faded quite away, and the new one was some months old before she accepted the invitation of Mrs. Charteris to come and pay a long visit at the Rectory, and make acquaintance with her relations.

Nell had seen her uncle and Nell before this, and had told them both she would not touch a penny of her grandfather's wealth.

In vain they reasoned. She said, gently, with the income her father bequeathed to her she was rich enough. As soon as ever she came of age she would sign a formal document, renouncing all claim to Charteris Hall and its revenues for herself and her heirs for ever.

If it could be done no other way she declared the entail must be cut off; but everyone consulted was of opinion that it could be done quite legally, but that Mrs. Danell had no right to despoil herself.

"I shall never care for Charteris," said Nell, simply. You will let me come and see you sometimes, and welcome me as a relation? The place is too much mixed up with the past in my mind for me to bear the thought of living there."

It was May when Mrs. Danell went to the Rectory, and very soon after her arrival she stood godmother to her cousin Nell's first son, who was called Clifford at her express wish.

"I would not have asked you if baby had been a girl," whispered Lill. "It would have reminded you too much."

Nell's eyes filled with tears.

"Hyacinth is in Heaven!" she said, sorrowfully. "I know I ought to be glad; but I

can't. You see, Lena, my whole life seems lonely."

"It won't be so always, dear."

Friends seemed unwilling it should be, even now. Vernon Grange was still nominally Sir Gay's; but he was travelling abroad, and there came a very warm invitation for Nell to go further east, and renew her acquaintance with the place which had been her mother's home.

"My dear, can you ever forgive me?"

It was Lady Decima who asked this. The proud, stately matron seemed strangely touched; the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I have nothing to forgive, dear Lady Decima. You were kindness itself to me the only time we met."

"I was not! Oh, Helen, I might have spared you all the misery you have suffered. I suspected from the moment I saw you that you were Magdalen's child; but I knew Gay was bent on renunciation, and I could not bear for him to lose the Grange, so I just held my tongue, and let things take their course. But I suffered terribly from remorse; I never had a happy hour after I knew how things were with you."

Nell kissed her gently.

"Dear Lady Decima, the past is past. I have known heavy trouble, but light is dawning beyond the clouds. And Sir Gay must never think of giving me the Grange. I don't want it; I won't have it."

One great pleasure Nell had in Monmouthshire. Her dear friend Lady Lillian—now a blithe little countess of six weeks' standing—came, at Lady Decima's invitation, to spend three nights at the Grange.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" cried Lill, when she had kissed her friend and wept over her a little. "How wonderful it all seems! I will never try my fortune again, never. I should be afraid; for see how true they have come, yours and mine too!"

"I don't think you want a second fortune, Lill dear; the first is ought enough."

"And what of yours? What of your dream, Nell? Shall you make the hyacinth knight happy? I can guess his name—Sir Gay Vernon!"

It was many months before Helen and the "hyacinth knight" met again, and when they did it was by accident—the second spring of her widowhood. Nell was again staying at the Rectory; and one morning she and Lill drove over to see old Nurse Edwards. Lill was well content to be left at the Cottage for an hour or so, to glean nursery hints from its mistress. Nell turned the ponies' heads towards Riversdale; the strangest of all longings was on to see again the spot where Guy Vernon had told her of his love.

Just the same, save that the month was May instead of November, that the trees were budding green instead of changing colour; just the same, all save Nell's life. Could it be that her life was like the year, and had put away its shadows and crowned itself with budding hopes? She was not far from twenty-two now; her beauty had matured and ripened, but her face had still its own wistful charm. A lovely dignified woman was Mrs. Danell, but she had still the sweet face of little Nell.

And so thought a man who stood watching her in perfect silence—a man who, journeying from the West to London, had broken his journey at Gloucester just to revisit the spot where the greatest joy, the keenest pain of his life had come to him.

"Guy!"

"Nell!"

Just the same salutation as of yore, but how changed the faces! The woman's brow was full of gladness; the man's was serious, almost sad.

"I thought you had forgotten me."

"Nell, you could not think that."

"Well, you never came near me."

"Did you care?"

She raised her eyes to his face—those eyes which have been the star of all Gay's wanderings; then she blushes crimson and whispers,—

"Yes. I wanted you, Guy."

"Sweetheart, you know why I hesitated."

"You despoiled me."

"Nell!"

"It looked like it."

"I am poor, and you are rich"

"You have Vernon Grange!"

"It is yours."

"I will never have it."

"Never!"

"Never! unless—"

He bent towards her with open arms.

"My darling, will you take the old homestead and me with it? Darling, will you gladden my heart and gild my whole life with sunshine by becoming my wife, Lady Vernon, of Vernon Grange?"

"Do you wish it?"

"Wish it! It is the one desire of my heart."

"I am not worthy."

"Not worthy! You are worthy all that love can give. Nell, I have loved you from the first."

"And I you. Guy, our love won't be the less lasting because it has been tried in the furnace."

"My darling, no."

And then a great deep joy within their hearts. The affianced pair drove slowly back to Nurse's cottage; the engagement was published that very day, and warm and fervent were congratulations that flooded in.

"Only," said Lena Charteris, half-regretfully, "this ought to have happened two months ago."

"Why?" demanded Nell. "Sorely May is a more suitable time for rejoicings than bleak cheerless March."

"In March I could have gone up to the hot-house at the Hall, Nell, and gathered you some white hyacinths, but there are none left now."

Dr. Charteris shook his head.

"Lill, how superstitious she is," he said, half jestingly to Guy. "I do believe she believes no event in Nell's life can be authentic without the intervention of the flowers which have been so mixed up with her life's story."

Lill pouted very prettily.

"I believe something else," she said, pathetically; "only I know you'll all call me superstitious if I tell you."

"You must risk that, please, Mrs. Charteris," said Sir Gay, "for we are all longing to know."

"I'll tell you if she won't," put in Nell, mischievously; "she confided to me not five minutes ago that she believed Nell was VERNON'S DESTINY."

[THE END.]

GIVE HIM BACK TO ME.

—10—

CHAPTER XXVI.

DANGEROUSLY GOOD LOOKING.

AND so the days passed on, and nothing more was heard of Mr. St. John, *alias* Jack Sartoris. Those who knew him under his own name, and no other, were not in the least surprised at his disappearance. They said that he had been vanishing on and off during the last six or seven years, so that there was nothing to be astonished at if he went off from a country house in the middle of the night, especially as he was probably bored to death by the restraints of conventional life after camping out in the Rockies, or trying adventures in the Andes.

It was no use asking where he was, for if his bankers knew they were bound in honour not to tell, though probably they would undertake to forward any letters to his present address.

Lady Stapleton wrote to him, and sent the letter under cover to Messrs. Gordon and Gregson requesting them to forward it at once to Mr. Sartoris, in answer to which she had a polite intimation to the effect that her wishes should be attended to as soon as possible, but they were doubtful as to his address at the present moment. In the letter, she told him of Violet's illness, and implored him to return at once, taking care to mention that the illness was brought on by the shock of being told too suddenly the false report of his own death. Of course she added her firm conviction that his presence would

work Violet's instant cure, and after such an assertion she knew that he was not likely to tarry by the way.

For a little while she confidently expected him, but nobody arrived, except fat old Mrs. Milton, the housekeeper at the Priory. She begged her ladyship's pardon for coming where she wasn't asked; but directly she heard that her dear mistress was ill, she felt that nothing could keep her from coming to nurse her. If the house was full she did not want a bedroom—any hole or cupboard would do for her; but near her mistress she must be, or she felt as if her heart would burst.

Lady Stapleton welcomed her warmly, and moved by an irresistible wish to confide in somebody, told her of the experiment she had made in passing Mr. Sartoris off as an old friend named St. John.

Mrs. Milton listened with all her ears. Master Jack had been in that very house, and her dear mistress, though she did not recognise him at all, took to him at once!

"Ah! thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, the tears running down her cheeks. "I always knew there was hope, if we could ever get them to meet. They've the two best hearts in the world, and it was only natural that they should be like magnets to one another."

"Yes, but why has he gone?" said Lady Stapleton, fretfully. "I'm sure he has caused me so much anxiety that it is enough to worry me into my grave."

"So it seems just now, my lady, but there are brighter days in store," her eyes growing bright, a smile gathering round her large, good-tempered mouth. "I'm sure I shall have to dance Sir Roger myself next Christmas. If we have both master and mistress at the Priory."

"You shall," said Lady Stapleton, cordially, "and I'll come and dance it too, whether they invite me or not."

"Let my lady, it stands to reason they couldn't do without you after all you've done for them. I am sure you've been like a mother to the poor dear, and though it's very presuming of me, I bless you for it from the bottom of my heart. And now it's time for the second dose of medicine," curtseying as she bustled to the door. "Please Heaven, we shall pull her through. I'm sure I see a turn for the better last night."

"I believe the sight of you did her a world of good, but you must take care not to knock yourself up!"

"Let my lady, I'm as tough as a piece of hide. If I've got a thing to do I always can do it when those that are younger than me have to give in. But there's one favour, my lady," her voice softening, a look of tenderness coming into her eyes, which gave a new beauty to her commonplace face. "I want to ask you. They say that the dear master left all his things in his room here just as if he were coming back the next night. Now, I should like to have a look at them, just to see if there's a button off a shirt, or a hole in one of his socks. It would make me feel young again to think I was working for him as I used when he was a boy."

Permission was readily given, and the conversation closed. Lady Stapleton felt much better as soon as she had relieved her mind by taking Mrs. Milton into her confidence; and she had such trust in her nursing capabilities that she began to think Violet might get better, even if her husband had taken himself off to the Antipodes.

She ordered the carriage and drove over to London Lodge to ask how Cyril was getting on, and found him better, though still not strong. He asked eagerly after Violet, as well as if there had been any news of Mr. St. John; and when he was told there was none, and that he was the only man who knew for certain where Mr. Sartoris was, he advised advertising first for one and then for the other.

"I have," said Lady Stapleton, surprised to find that he had not noticed her appeal to Jack in the *Morning Post*, the *Times* or the *Daily Telegraph*.

"Then there's nothing else to be done," he said, when she had explained all the measures she had taken. "Of course you want to know where

Sartoris is, but why do you want to bring St. John back? Is it wise for either of their sakes?" he said very gently.

His wife had left the room, and they were alone together. Lady Stapleton sat quite quietly, revolving an important question in her mind. She had found some comfort in her confiding in Mrs. Milton, but Cyril would be still better. And then she recollected that the two men had never taken to each other, and even in the old days Jack Sartoris had always "a stand-offish" manner to the old friend of the family.

He might not approve of his secret being told to a man whom lately he seemed cordially to dislike—even that last night, somebody said they had quarrelled.

She roused herself to keen interest as she thought of it, and asked Cyril if he knew of any quarrel between Mr. St. John and anyone else.

He knitted his brows together, as if in deep thought, and answered, after a pause, "I don't know exactly what happened. Violet left the room to look for a song, but instead of going upstairs I found her sobbing her heart out on the library sofa."

"Sobbing then before the telegram was found?" Lady Stapleton was intensely puzzled.

"Yes, poor child. She actually couldn't speak. I tried to comfort her," his fair face slightly flushing as he thought of how he had held her hands in his, and kissed them; "but it was no good. And then—"

"Well, what then?" as he hesitated.

"I slipped and cut my head, I suppose I fainted, for I woke up, on the floor, with Violet bending over me in an awful fright."

"Dear! What a thoughtless child she is!" in a tone of great annoyance. "And I suppose your head was on her knee, and her arm round your neck?"

Cyril grew crimson with vexation. "Mrs. Sartoris was in the usual attitude in which she would be if she picked up a man whom she did not want to bleed to death."

"And Mr. St. John saw you like that?" tapping her foot on the floor, as she often did when displeased.

"I suppose he did."

"Doesn't it strike you that it might look rather touching?"

"Not in the least," shortly. "You are the last person, Lady Stapleton, to wish a girl to be such a prude as to think of propriety when a fellow wants help. You can see the mark still," lifting up his hair; "it was a sharp cut."

"Ah, poor fellow!" with a compassionate glance, and then her irritation got the better of her. "I never saw such people as you and your wife," she burst out, as if she could not help it; "you are always tumbling about!"

"Are we? I didn't know it," with a certain quiet dignity which made the old lady ashamed of herself.

"It wasn't Mabel's fault that she slipped on the boat, because probably she caught her foot in the end of a rope; but why you should fall down in the library I can't conceive."

"No more can I. I fancy St. John had something to do with it. He was there certainly. I don't know what passed, but Violet, I know, pitched into him, and told him to go, for she said so later on."

"Dear me! I seem to have been quite in the dark as to everything that was going on," pettishly. "That was why he rushed out into the storm like a madman. That is why he won't come back. Oh, Cyril! what a lot of harm you've done!"

"I?" in immense surprise.

"Yes. I wish to goodness you were old and ugly, marked with small-pox or anything!"

"And why, for goodness sake?" with a good-tempered smile about his lips. He had no personal conceit, but few men object to being told that they are dangerously good-looking.

"Because if you had been nobody would be jealous of you," she said imprudently.

Cyril London sat bolt upright, and his face grew stern. "If you mean Mr. St. John, let me ask you what right he has to be jealous of me or anyone else with regard to Mrs. Sartoris?"

Lady Stapleton stood up, and looked out at the

carriage, which she was thankful to see was standing at the door.

"Did the want of a right ever stop anyone from being jealous, or cross, or unreasonable?"

"Perhaps not," rising as he spoke; "but when fellows are jealous without the smallest right we don't put ourselves out about it, that's all, and we are apt to think it great impertinence."

Lady Stapleton flushed, feeling that he was entirely right from his point of view, and equally wrong from hers. Mabel returned at that moment, bringing with her a novel which she had gone to fetch for Lady Stapleton, and the conversation was abruptly changed.

As Lady Stapleton drove home through the leafy lanes, her mind was greatly disturbed. The quarrel had evidently been more serious than she imagined, and she had an idea that Cyril had actually been knocked down by Mr. St. John, though at present unwilling to confess it. If Jack were madly jealous, and Violet told him to go, it was highly probable that he left England at once, vowing never to return, and six years at least might elapse before he came back.

Whilst she was grieving over the untowardness of present events, Mrs. Milton had penetrated into the room which a few days before had been occupied by Jack Sartoris, and with fond hands that loved to touch, examined his various possessions.

There was a handsome travelling-bag, much the worse for wear, besides a hat-box, the case for his fishing-rod, and two shabby portmanteaus, one much smaller than the other, which, to judge by the scraps of railway-labels ornamenting the leather covering, had evidently travelled half over the world.

Presently she returned to Violet's room carrying in her hand several articles of clothing which wanted a stitch here and there. Little did the poor girl guess, as she tossed from side to side, that her dear old housekeeper was sitting close beside the bed putting a button on to one of her husband's shirts; or that that insignificant little button, worth not half a farthing, would play an important part in the history of her life!

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

PERHAPS it was thanks to Mrs. Milton's nursing that the invalid began to mend. There was not much improvement for some time, but the attacks of delirium grew less violent, and the cries for her lost husband less incessant. Sir Benjamin Tegg, the eminent physician from London, gave it as his opinion that the crisis was over, and Dr. Roche agreed with him. Mr. Bertie Mayne, a very grand young man with a good-looking face somewhat like his sister's, ran down to Holly Bank as soon as he could get free from his important duties as private secretary to a Cabinet Minister. He was very fond of Violet, and always in a state of smothered indignation against her husband.

"Tell you what she wants, aunt," he said, twirling his moustaches into a finer point, as he leaned against the prettily decorated mantelpiece in the boudoir. "Vi would be a different creature if she would let that dull hole down at Leighton, take a small house in London—say in Chester-street, Belgrave, and throw herself into the full swing of the season."

"All very well, my dear boy, but you forget two things, money and a chaperon," said Lady Stapleton composedly.

"Oh, hang it all! We've got plenty of money amongst us without poaching on Sartoris," pulling up his collar; "and as to a chaperon, I'd take her about. She's a good-looking girl nobody need be ashamed of, and wherever I couldn't manage it, she could fall back upon that nice little thing, Mr. London. Cyril talks of coming up in the spring."

"That wouldn't do at all," said his aunt hastily, with her fears about Jack's jealousy of London fresh in her mind. "It is always better for a girl to be with her own relations. I was thinking of going down to Brook-street, and of

course I should be delighted to have Violet with me. I can't bear to be alone."

"The very thing!" cried Bertie. "Couldn't be better. My dear aunt, you are an angel!"

"On the contrary, I'm a selfish old woman. I love the child, and I can't do without her."

"Well, suppose we say 'a brick.' An angel would be so far above me. I couldn't appreciate her," smiling down into her kindly face.

She returned the smile, for she was fond of her nephew, though sometimes amused at the amount of "swagger" he put on.

"Now go. I know you are dying to have a smoke. Find out Ralph Armitage, and have a cigarette together."

A slight shade crossed his face.

"Why is Armitage still hanging about the place? The others have had the decency to go. Why doesn't he take himself off?"

Lady Stapleton looked down at the newspaper on her knees, as if she had found something of great interest.

"He saved her life you must remember."

"Yes, I know," biting his lip, for the subject was very unpleasant to him. "But I don't suppose he means to stand on guard over her for the rest of her life, like a policeman. Shall I give him a hint? That sort of thing carried on in London would create a scandal!"

"Oh, pray be careful! The Armitages have such awful tempers," feeling uneasy, she scarcely knew why.

"I don't care if he abuses me like a pickpocket. He's nothing to me, nor his sister either. Seems to me the one is as sweet on the husband as the other on the wife. They both want a lesson, and I shouldn't be surprised if I gave it them," with a knowing nod, as he left the room.

"Pray be careful," Lady Stapleton repeated. The future seemed full of pitfalls, into which those she had loved best were likely to stray, and she could only watch and wait, and confide them both to the care of Providence.

Bertie was a continual torment to Ralph Armitage. He asked such direct questions and such an amount of them, and seemed so amazed if he got anything but a direct answer. For some reason best known to himself, he seemed particularly interested in Mr. St. John; although he did not suspect his identity with Jack Sartoris for a moment, and Ralph was nearly driven mad by his utterly refusing to believe that a man would voluntarily wait five hours at a railway station, especially without a hat, when there was plenty of time for him to return, get another, have a good rest, and start afresh.

"I don't know the fellow; probably never saw him; but if he were a friend of mine I should go into mourning for him, for I'm sure his body is in the Crannock," he would say, with firm conviction.

"I saw him a mile or two beyond."

"I know that, but he must have come back to look for his hat, and tumbled in."

"You forget that it is proved that he was at the railway station."

"I know some fellow was there without a hat, but that won't convince me that it was Mr. St. John. I lost mine that very night in St. James's street."

And so he would go on discussing the matter with most eager interest for half-an-hour, and then dropping it as suddenly as he had taken it up.

Sometimes he would urge that the Crannock should be dragged, and urged it vehemently, too, as if he were going to give the necessary orders for it the very next day; but when the morning came it had passed out of his mind, or else he allowed his suggestions to be pooh-poohed by his aunt.

All this drove Ralph distracted, and now he made up his mind that he had better turn his back on Holly Bank before he was reduced to the condition of a lunatic. Violet was out of danger, so that he could leave without so terrible a pang. As he lay awake at night he planned out the future for himself and the woman he loved so recklessly. She must be convinced that her husband was dead, and all the world must know it too, or else she could never be induced to marry him. But how was this to be done?

There must be no connection between his death and the night of the storm. It would be safest that it should be supposed to happen abroad; but how could this be accomplished? After turning the matter over and over in his mind he conceived a daring project, in which he could see some chance of success if he carried it out without flinching.

He told Lady Stapleton that he would have to run up to town on Thursday. He thanked her exceedingly for her hospitality, and begged to place himself at her disposal, if he could be of any service to her. She thanked him in return, and asked him to keep his eyes and ears wide open in case he might see or hear anything of Mr. St. John.

He promised gravely.

"How ill he looks!" thought Lady Stapleton, but she was glad to hear that he was going away, as she was tired of him; especially as of late he had done nothing towards enlivening the conversation at dinner.

On Wednesday night he stole along the corridor with noiseless tread, and stopped at the door of what had once been Mr. St. John's room.

As he laid his hand on the handle a shrill cry came from the other end of the passage, and the candle clattered on the floor. It was the voice of one whom he had cruelly wronged—the voice of the wife calling for the husband whom he had murdered.

"Jack! Jack! come back! Why don't you answer me?"

A glacial thrill ran through his veins. They had told him that her delirium had passed away. Why did she call like that? It was as if she knew!

He opened the door and shut it quickly behind him, whilst the perspiration stood out in large beads upon his forehead. He gave a nervous look round, but the room was empty. There was no one there to spy upon his actions, or to ask how he, of all people in the world, could dare meddle with the belongings of the dead.

He did not like the task he had set himself, but evidently thinking that the sooner he set about it the sooner it would be over, he lifted a small portmanteau out of a corner, threw it open, and presently filled it with such articles of clothing as a man would be likely to take with him when going from home on a short visit.

All this he did as hurriedly as possible, and then he opened the handsome dressing-bag and split the grease of the candle over the gold top of the eau-de-Cologne bottle, in his anxiety to find some visiting cards. Just as he had almost given up hope of finding any, he discovered a few at the bottom of a side pocket.

How surprised he would have been to see the name of Sartoris upon them, instead of St. John, if it had not been for that one last glance! There it was in full,—

Mr. Sartoris,

Fardon Court, Devon. Carlton Club, London.

He gazed on the few words as if there were a spell in them, then with a shudder thrust the cards into a corner of the portmanteau, and shut the dressing-bag. There were a few old letters lying in the fender, and amongst them an envelope directed in Jack's handwriting to Lady Stapleton.

It was one which she had returned to him with a few lines from Violet inside, which she thought he would like to see. The lines had been taken out and treasured near his heart—the envelope he threw away.

Ralph poked it up eagerly, and secreted it for future use, the colour rushing into his pale face with relief at so valuable a find. It seemed as if Fate were indeed playing into his hands, and affording him every means of escape, or perhaps it was the Evil One himself.

There was something more suggestive of works of darkness than anything else in the dimly lighted room, and the solitary figure with the nervous eyes darting ever right and left like those of a pickpocket fearing the policeman's tap on his shoulder.

Ralph felt he had sunk immeasurably as the

cold sweat broke out on his face, and his heart thumped at the mere creaking of a board.

He had always taken it for granted that he possessed as much courage as any Englishman, but now he was the veriest coward in the land.

A white sheet on a broomstick—the bogey of childhood—would have made him fall down in a fit, as he made his way with shoeless feet back down the silent corridor to the shelter of his own room.

Was it fancy, or did he hear a voice in the distance calling out, as he closed the door gently behind him,—

"Give him back to me!"

He thought of the hopeless quest she had once tried to send him on to America or Siberia in search of her husband. Then his heart had failed him, as he thought of the long journey without much hope of a reward. Now he told himself that he would have travelled as far and as continuously as the wandering Jew, if by so travelling he could have brought Jack Sartoris out of the jaws of death, and himself the priceless gift of peace of mind.

But, alas! the past may always be repented of, but rarely can be undone.

Before he went to bed that night he managed to squeeze the small portmanteau into his own larger one. This left but little room for his own things, but he crammed in as many as he could, forcing them in with all his strength, until it was almost impossible to bring the lid down into its proper place. He sat down upon it, and after much exertion contrived to lock it.

Then he gathered up some spotless shirts, and wrapped them up ruthlessly with his rage, doing everything for himself contrary to his usual habit.

The daylight was streaming into his room before all his work was done, and when he was able to fling himself on his bed the most gruesome fancies kept haunting his mind, and he could not sleep a wink.

At last he fell into a doze, and dreamt that Jack Sartoris's corpse was hidden in the portmanteau; that he was bound to take it with him wherever he went; that it was under his seat at a dinner party; that it got between him and his partner at a ball; that it wedged itself between himself and his bride at the altar.

He woke shuddering with horror as the wedding-ring slipped through his trembling fingers into the hand of the corpse. Was it an omen?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THE MARQUESS OF BELVEATHER."

LADY STAPLETON'S house in Brook-street was furnished with a due regard to comfort and elegance. She was one of those people who are content to follow the fashion so far as it suits them, but no further.

The halls were adorned with handsome curtains drawn across the archways because, not only were they pleasant to the eye, but they also kept out a considerable amount of draught.

Carpets were placed over the polished floors of the drawing-rooms in the winter because they added to the warmth, and nothing would induce her to have straight-backed sofas and chairs in order to look more correctly old-fashioned when she considered them so desperately uncomfortable.

It was now the month of January, with cold and frost reigning in the streets, and hunger and wretchedness in the slums; but here in this beautifully decorated room the firelight was playing cheerfully on tiger-skin mats, old Chelsea china, a Parian marble statuette gleaming white against a Turkish curtain, the corner of a picture-frame of antique shape, and the diamond brooch which shone like a star in the front of Lady Stapleton's head-dress.

Dressed in black velvet, her fair hair slightly tinged with grey, drawn up over a cushion, Lady Stapleton would still outshine many younger women by means of her own personal attractions.

As she sat there before the fire, holding up a screen of dark red feathers between her face and the blaze, she could not help confessing to herself that she was very nervous.

She had acted on Bertie Mayne's advice, and brought Violet up to town to try what a little gaiety would do for her; and to-night, for the first time for seven years, she was to appear in a London ball-room.

Lord and Lady Mayne were still in Vienna, but now after that first false step Lady Stapleton consulted them about every move. They quite approved of the present step, and thought it was time for their daughter to give up her life of seclusion.

Bertie offered to escort them to their first party, and presently appeared with a bunch of gardenias and hellebore, which he presented to his aunt for the front of her dress, and a lovely bouquet of Neapolitan violets and Gloire de Dijons for his sister.

He was dressed faultlessly, and looked a thorough gentleman, a thick gold chain to his watch, and a signet ring, being his only attempts at jewellery.

"How is she—pretty fit?" he asked, as he leant his back against the mantelpiece.

"Yes; I hope so. She has been quite bright to-day, and seemed to enjoy shopping in Regent-street," said his aunt, cheerfully.

"Not inclined to kick over the traces exactly?"

"My dear boy, what are you thinking of?" in scandalised reproof.

"Well, you know, she may be trained to run in double harness and not like it if they try her alone. But here she is! Well, V!—you don't look altogether bad!" in a tone of involuntary admiration.

Not bad! when she was enough to delight the eyes of any man who had eyes to see, and taste to appreciate!

She was dressed in black lace of the finest texture, and diamonds were her only ornaments. The black set off the dazzling whiteness of her skin and the extreme delicacy of her beauty, and nothing could have been more becoming.

If Jack—poor Jack—could only have seen her, he would almost have knelt at her feet!

"Oh, Bertie, how kind of you!" she exclaimed as he put the roses into her hands, and she held up her face to his for a kiss.

"Nothing to speak of. Wouldn't allow any other man to give them to you. Now let us be off."

He hurried them into the carriage, for it was already eleven o'clock, and he did not want his sister's *entrée* to be 'spoiled' by arriving late, when everyone was too much occupied to look out for newcomers.

Like his aunt, he felt rather nervous, for he quite appreciated the awkwardness of his sister's position as a wife without any visible husband; but if man or woman dared to show her the cold shoulder, he meant to make either rather sorry for his or her conduct.

All went well. The Duchess of Kensington gave the trio an especially warm welcome, and even went so far as to kiss Violet on both cheeks, and say something flatteringly in an audible whisper.

Her son, the Marquis of Belfeather, insisted upon an instantaneous introduction, and led her off in triumph, as if she had been the belle of the last season.

"You don't dance? Quite right, we'll leave it to the boys and girls," he said, with youthful audacity, as he led her to a comfortable seat he knew of in a corner. There he amused her with his quaint conversation, whilst his eyes dwelt with some remnant of enthusiasm on her beauty. He was only four-and-twenty, but he had been "going the pace" ever since he left Eton, and of course knew every pleasure so well that he was quite blasé.

But he could still talk to a pretty woman with great satisfaction, although he was tired to death of flirtations with the girls; or, at least, he said so.

Numbers of friends claimed acquaintance with Violet, and she received them all with the same sweet smile, playing her part as Bertie allowed, to perfection. She did not dance, but as she was known to be in delicate health, no one minded

her refusal, or felt offended at it; and her aunt agreed that it was perhaps in better taste, considering her unprotected state, to sit still and while away the time in pleasant talk.

It was perfectly clear from the very beginning that nobody, not even the strictest dowager or the veriest old maid, meant to fight shy of her. Her air of quiet dignity gave the lie to any report of fastness, and Lady Stapleton's escort would have been sufficient to cover a multitude of sins.

Lord Belfeather came back to her later in the evening, and insisted upon taking her in to supper. And when supper was over he took her a tour through the rooms which were worth seeing, and of historic interest.

"How is it that I have never seen you before?" he said, as he sat down by her side in the same corner which he had selected beforehand; "surely you must have been out of England—lost in a fire fountain, or stranded on a mountain."

"Lost in Kent," she said, quietly; "not a hundred miles off."

"And I never knew it! Oh, to think the time that I have wasted!" he exclaimed, tragically.

"Did you bury yourself under the ground, or in a haystack? I've run down to Canterbury often for the cricket week. I've been to Dover scores of times; I've spent a day and a half at Rochester, and lived for a fortnight with some fellows of the Artillery at Woolwich, and if you had been anywhere about I must have heard of it."

"But I wasn't. Nobody heard of me, for I was hidden in the little village of Leighton."

"I suppose there's a trout stream and plenty of foxes, and your husband's mad about sport?"

He was sorry directly the words were out of his mouth, for he saw a look of pain cross her face, and there was a pause before she answered in a low voice,—

"Mad about sport? Yes, I suppose so; one year in the Sudan, another in the Rockies, a third on the Andes."

"And you are left behind?" his eyes opening.

"Evidently this man Sartoris did not know when he was in luck," he thought to himself.

"Yes, such a sort of life would not suit me at all. I should get sick to death of running about."

Quite agree with you. When you stand still it gives time for your friends to come up. And now that you are 'standing still' in Brook-street you will let me take my chance!" looking into her eyes with an expression of fervent admiration in his own.

"My aunt will be delighted to see you."

"And you?"—softly—"you won't be sorry?"

"No. If I thought I should be sorry I would say 'Not at home!'"

"But you won't say it—promise me you won't!"

She was looking up with a laughing answer on her lips, amused at his earnestness, when suddenly she caught sight of Ralph Armitage making his way towards her through the crowd. A cloud came before her eyes, as the sight of his face reminded her of all she most wished to forget.

"Take me away," she said, in a frightened whisper; "do you see that man? He is coming—and I can't speak to him."

The Marquis looked round and saw who it was she wished to avoid. As she stood up, he said,—

"Allow me!" and the next moment his arm was round her slender waist, and they were waltzing in the midst of the throng of dancers, whilst Ralph Armitage looked after them with an angry frown.

Lord Belfeather found he had a perfect partner, and was delighted with his own presence of mind; but when they pulled up after several delightful turns, he apologised most humbly.

"I knew you didn't want to dance, and it was awfully cool of me; but it was the only way."

"I know it was," she said, gratefully.

"And now, don't you think it would be safer to take another turn?" he asked cunningly.

And so it came to pass that she danced a whole waltz with Lord Belfeather—a dance twice as long as any other, for the musicians received a hint to go on a little longer whenever they seemed inclined to stop. And Violet enjoyed it, as she had enjoyed that first dance at the Priory, before the footstep on the gravel had roused such tortur-

ing doubts. An exquisite sense of returning youth came over her, as her small feet kept perfect time with the music; and she and the young Marquis seemed to be floating on the wings of melody, into some sphere of happiness where the wretchedness of the past was quite forgotten. And when the dance was over he took her to all the out-of-the-way corners he could think of, on pretence of eluding the pursuit of Ralph Armitage; and was delighted at the consciousness of having established this brand-new friendship on quite a confidential footing.

"We won't ask the fellow if you've the smallest objection to meeting him," he promised, as indeed he was ready to promise anything, for there was a look in Violet's eyes which seemed to go straight to his impressionable young heart. A chivalrous desire rose in his breast to do something for her—some little service for which she might give him a word of gratitude, and one of her wondrous smiles.

Her husband was a brute to leave her in such a forlorn condition, and again and again he wondered that one so beautiful should be so cruelly neglected.

Bertie laughed at the air of devotion with which the Marquis attended his sister to the cloak-room and carriage, and at the judicious undertone in which he asked if he might call and inquire how she was between four and five the next day.

"If you don't mind the trouble," she said, with a smile. "One of the footmen will be able to tell you."

Lord Belfeather bit the end of his small moustache, as he bowed and stepped back, and he went back again up the broad staircase with a puzzled expression on his face. Did she mean it for a snub? Could she possibly mean that he wasn't to go in? Had he done anything to offend her? His conscience was quite clear, and his countenance brightened, for it required rather more than an insignificant little doubt to damp the spirits of the popular young Marquis.

A cousin of Lady Jane's was running down the stairs when Lord Belfeather stopped him.

"I'm in a awful hurry," Mr. Clinton remarked.

"So I see, but just answer a question. Weren't you shooting in the Andes with a man named Sartoris?"

"Yes, last year. I've got an appointment at one o'clock, and it's five minutes' past," going down on to a lower step.

"Then you are too late already. What sort of man is he?"

"Best fellow out."

"Why—why does he desert his wife?" hesitating in spite of his eagerness, and almost speaking in a whisper.

"Screw loose somewhere; not his fault, I'd bet a thousand."

"I'd bet a million it wasn't hers," with the eager confident faith of a young man who knows nothing about the matter.

Ned Clinton laughed, and made his escape, whilst Lord Belfeather, a little graver than usual, pursued his way upstairs.

On the landing he met Ralph Armitage, who asked him at once if he could tell him where Mrs. Sartoris was.

"Gone just this minute!" cheerfully.

"Gone!" the pallid face flushing with irrepressible vexation. "And I haven't spoken a word to her!"

"Are you a friend of hers?" carelessly, watching him from under his long lashes, and coming to the swift conclusion that the friendship was not enough on his side at least.

"Yes; rather," with an emphasis which left a wide field open for conjecture. "I had no idea she was in London. Can you tell me her address?"

"I didn't ask it," not thinking it necessary to add, "because I was told it beforehand."

With an amused smile he went on his way, wondering if anything on earth would have dragged the address out of him, when he felt sure that Mrs. Sartoris did not wish it to be known by this so-called friend.

By-and-by he came across a man who knew everybody's business better than his own, and who told him Violet's story with variations, winding up with the prophecy that one day Sar-

toris would be picked up dead at the bottom of a gully, and his widow would become Mrs. Armistage.

"Why, she hates him!" exclaimed Lord Belfeather, in angry protest.

"Possibly, but he will be too much for her. He saved her life, you see, and he's the sort of fellow to exact the last farthing."

"Let him try. I think some of us will be clever enough to prevent him," in hot disdain.

"Not you, Belfeather! Don't have anything to do with her. Not safe—hate a woman with a story."

"Depends upon the story, and the woman too," under his breath. "Look here, I don't mean any nonsense," he said aloud, "but I know a good woman when I see one, and I've an idea that we might be friends. I think we all ought to stand by her, as it's one of us who has behaved so badly to her."

"Does Mrs. Sartoris want an army?"

"No, but an honest friend or two would do her no harm."

The other man turned away with a cynical smile. It was a novelty to see Belfeather enthusiastic about anything; and having lived too long in the world to believe in the purity of human motives, he looked into the future, and foresaw a scandal.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STRANGE LIKENESS.

LADY JANE ARMITAGE never looked so well as in a habit, and the consciousness of looking her best generally put her into a good temper. But to-day there were signs that her personal barometer was doing the reverse of rising, as she stood on the hearth-rug biting the end of her hunting-crop with her small white teeth.

Her brother no longer lived in the family mansion in Eaton-square, but had lodgings of his own in Albemarle-street. However, to-day he had come in early to ask his father a question, and had remained to write a letter in the Countess of Oldthorpe's boudoir.

"Do you know, Ralph, I am growing uneasy!" said Lady Jane suddenly, although she had been pondering over the remark for some time. "It is so very odd that nothing has been heard of Jack Sartoris for all these ages."

A splutter of ink came down on the paper, as his pen fell from his hand. "How can you expect me to write sense if you will interrupt so!" he said irritably, and bent his face lower over the writing, as if he had suddenly become short-sighted.

Lady Jane's lip curled contemptuously; but she said quietly, "I will wait till you have finished."

He prolonged his letter as long as he could; but knowing that her eyes were upon him he was obliged to direct the envelope as soon as he had signed his name, lest she should accuse him of dawdling, and suspect a secret motive. Heaven help him! He had to be on his guard now with his sister, as well as with his nearest acquaintance, and never say the first thing that came into his head, as he used to do in the days of comparative innocence.

"Well, are you ready?" she said impatiently.

"What is it?" gruffly, wishing with all his heart that he had never come inside his mother's boudoir, and so offered himself as a prey to his sister's eager curiosity.

"Don't you think it very strange that we haven't had a word from Jack Sartoris?"

Ralph did not look round, but began industriously pulling the feather of the quill-pen to pieces, as if his future security depended on the manner in which he denuded the stem.

"Not at all, why should we hear! We have nothing to do with him."

"Speak for yourself," with a slight toss of her head; "ever since he went away he has looked on me as his only friend in England."

"That is putting it rather strong, considering that he had a wife," with an attempt at a sarcastic smile.

The colour rushed into her face in an over-

powering flood. She turned away her head, as she said quickly, "You know that his wife is nothing to him. What does it matter to him whether she is alive or dead, when he is at the Antipodes, and she is amusing herself in Brook-street. By the bye, what did she say last night?"

"Say—nothing!"

"You don't mean to say she never spoke to you?" opening her eyes.

"I was late; I couldn't get near her, and young Belfeather monopolised her."

"You are not such friends as you used to be!" watching him closely.

No answer; but she saw a scowl come upon his face—a scowl of the fiercest, darkest kind—which betokened a storm raging within.

"It seems as if you and I were both down on our luck," she said tentatively. "Jack forgets me, and his wife snubs you."

"Nothing of the sort," savagely; "a woman can't talk to everyone."

"No; but she might have the politeness to give a word to the man who saved her life."

"Let her alone," sullenly.

"No, Ralph; just for your sake I'll go and see her this afternoon. You wouldn't have gone into mourning, I know, if poor Jack had died in that railway accident."

"No, I shouldn't have gone into mourning," in an odd voice, as his heart throbbed at the thought of what endless misery he himself would have been spared if that first report had been true.

"Will you be a good boy, and do me a favour!" coaxingly, as she leant over the back of his chair.

His head bent lower as he said,—

"What is it? I'm not going to take a leap in the dark."

"Only I want you to go to Gordon and Gregson—his bankers, you know—and ask if they've heard anything from him."

"Not I, Jane, I'm ashamed of you!" sternly, as he rose from the chair, and looked down at her with resentful eyes. "I couldn't do it. Nothing would tempt me. Do you want the whole of London to laugh at your infatuation?"

"You hate him, so you think it disgraceful for anyone, even his oldest friends, to have the smallest interest in him," her voice trembling with excitement, her slim figure quivering with indignation.

His face changed, his cheeks grew livid.

"Who says I hate him!"

"I do. You cannot bear his name to be mentioned. I've seen you actually shiver with disgust when we've been talking of him."

"Good heavens! what nonsense you are talking, Jane! I believe you can make yourself imagine anything. To show that it is all rot I'll go to Gordon and Gregson this very day," with an air of resolution, as he went towards the door.

Lady Jane was so surprised that she could scarcely believe her ears; but she told him he was a good boy, and patted him on the back. Then as her eye fell on the writing-table she said, with a little laugh,—

"You are forgetting your letter. Shall I send it to the post with mine?"

"I shall forget my head next," he said, in a tone of such dejection that she looked up with surprise.

It came upon her with the effect of a shock that he was looking years older than he really was, and that his face had grown terribly thin, as if worn with grief or disease.

She laid her hand upon his arm, and said, kindly,—

"What is it, Ralph! Have you anything on your mind?"

She asked the question out of a simple impulse of compassion, because he was going to do her a kindness, and her heart felt softened towards him. She was, therefore, startled and astonished beyond measure when he threw off her hand as if it were stinging him, and with an oath hurried out of the room.

He shut the door behind him, and when he was on the outside he told himself that he had been a fool, and constrained himself to go back, and say, gently,—

"Don't think me a brute, Jane; but fact is I've been driven nearly mad with neuralgia lately, and the slightest word upsets me."

"Why didn't you tell me! You must have that prescription of Dr. Simpson's made up."

"Wouldn't do me the least good in the world!" and he hurried out of the room again, remembering to give a careless nod and a smile as he went out of the door.

Lady Jane went for her usual ride in the park, under the escort of Colonel Forrester and his daughter; but she did not enjoy it, though the morning was as bright as the winter sunshine could make it and she met a number of friends.

Her brother's worn face was always before her eyes, do what she would to forget it. There must be something in the background to produce such a dreadful effect in the space of a few months—something infinitely worse than neuralgia—something which a doctor's prescription could never cure!

If it were a question of money he would have come to her at once, as he had come so often before, when plagued by importunate creditors. A foreboding of evil crept over her, which took the ring out of her laughter, and damped the brightness of her conversation. Ralph was altered, Jack Sartoris gone, and life seemed a very dull sort of affair to take so much trouble about.

"Did you ever see that Mr. St. John whom Lady Stapleton made such a fuss over?" Miss Forrester asked presently, as they slackened their pace.

"No, by the merest chance I always missed him," said Lady Jane, wondering what had put the question into her friend's head.

"I did once, as he was coming out of Holly Bank. His horse was inclined to be up to mischief, and I must say he sat on him as if he was glued to the saddle."

"He was good-looking, wasn't he?"

"You would think so," with a mischievous glance, quite thrown away upon Lady Jane, as her horse swerved to the left at the moment.

"He was the exact image of that Mr. Sartoris whom we met at your house in the summer. Don't you remember, he was running downstairs as we came up!"

Lady Jane did remember. Jack had fled as if the approaching visitors had the small-pox, and in his hurry to avoid them had rushed into Mrs. Forrester's arms. How she laughed at him afterwards!

"Nonsense, you must have imagined it. Nobody ever told me so before."

"You know that Mr. Sartoris's moustaches were the nicest in the world! Well, Mr. St. John's were just the same."

"You must have stared him out of countenance!"

"I always use my eyes when there is something good to look at. Good-morning," to a friend who rode up to her side. "We thought you had started for Burma!"

The conversation changed, but Lady Jane kept the substance of it in her mind. If the likeness was so very striking, it was odd that Lady Stapleton had never mentioned it!

CHAPTER XXX.

"YOU PROMISED ON YOUR HONOUR!"

"TRUST to me, Mrs. Sartoris, and on my word of honour you shan't fail," said Lord Belfeather, taking summary possession of two little hands, and looking down into her face with the happiest air of appropriation.

They were standing together on the edge of a frozen lake in the grounds of the Duke of Kensington's favourite country-house, not very far from London. The large family estate was in the North, and therefore at too great a distance for only a stay of a day and a night.

The Duchess had carried off Violet almost at a moment's notice, because she had taken a fancy to her pretty face, and was sorry for her desolate position. She meant to show the world that it was "the correct thing" to know Mrs. Sartoris; so she took her by the hand metaphorically, as

her son was doing literally, and with such willing devotion amongst the throng of skaters at a few yards from the bank.

It was an animated scene. Besides the home party staying at "The Willows," there was a large contingent of visitors from the neighbourhood, and some of the ladies' bright dresses gave a piquant tinge to the crowd. There was a tent on the bank, where there was an open space amongst the flowerless rhododendrons, and in front of the tent a large fire of coke in a cresset, round which there was generally a group composed of the Duchess and her particular friends.

Hills wooded to the water's edge enclosed the lake at the eastern end; the grey stone house with castellated towers and deep oriel windows stood on the northern side facing a graceful group of willows, which gave the place its name, on the southern. It looked the picture of an English home, with grace, comfort and beauty combined, to make a perfect whole, and it was to be Lord Belfeather's as soon as he chose to take unto himself a wife. Many bright eyes followed the young Marquis as he fitted past old friends and now, utterly absorbed by the fascination of a pale sweet face, with a strangely wistful smile—a face that seemed to raise him out of the prosaic life of everyday into a higher sphere; where chivalry was no longer a dream, and men were ruled by something nobler than their own ignoble desires. He could not tear himself away, though he began to feel that reproachful glances were thrown at him as he passed, and unkind remarks were being made behind his back.

"If you would only tell me of anything that I could do for you," he said softly, as he unwillingly let go of her hands, whilst they were standing still to recover breath in a sheltered nook, where the withered ferns on the bank were traced out in the most delicate frost-work. "It's no humbug, Mrs. Sartoris. To have a real honest 'thank you' from you would make me the happiest fellow alive."

"You are very kind!" with a smile, followed by a sigh.

"You haven't answered me. Can't I read it in your face! There is something you are wishing for, and I would give all I have in the world to know what it was."

"It wouldn't interest you. It concerns myself, no one else."

"No one else! That's impossible," with a short laugh, as if half amused at the depth of his own feeling, and half ashamed of it as well. "Do you know that I can't get to sleep at night for thinking of it, and I've always slept like a top! Do you know that it takes such a hold of me, that often when I'm with fellows I make quite an ass of myself, and answer all wrong!"

"And you couldn't guess!" bitterly.

"I made a hundred guesses. Shall I tell you one?" lowering his voice.

She bent her head, till half her face was hidden in her bosom of sable tulle.

"That you are married to a man not worthy of you!"

"Wrong, a thousand times wrong!" indignantly.

The colour rushed into Belfeather's face. He was almost afraid to try again, and yet he was drawn on by a feverish eagerness which he strove in vain to resist. Whilst he was hesitating, she raised her head, and a lovely flush crept over the whiteness of her cheeks.

"In the present depraved state of society, of course you could not imagine that a wife might want her husband," she said, almost angrily.

"Then why are you alone?" he said, thoughtlessly, only thinking that if he were the lucky man she wanted he would never have left her side.

Her voice was very low as she answered, sadly,—

"Because in this life the thing you most wish for is always furthest off."

"Ah! I! I were Sartoris!"—he stopped and bit his moustaches.

"You might have made the same mistake."

"I don't know what the mistake was," looking down, almost defiantly, into her eyes; "but I could stake my head I would have stuck to you

—yes, stuck to you through everything—and never left you like this"—infinite compassion in his voice—"to fight the world alone."

Then there was silence between them. Whilst he looked across the shimmering ice to where there was a gathering glow in the west, his face flushed with a boyish enthusiasm, his heart beating with a strange excitement.

"Shall I tell him that you want him? He can't know it?" he asked, after a long pause.

"No. But if you want to do me a service—"

She hesitated.

"I do. I swear I do."

"If ever you meet him—supposing I am dead and out of the way—tell him that it was a mistake from the beginning; it was pride, and nothing else, that separated us. I—I never cared"—a crimson blush overspread her face. Was it that a thought of Mr. St. John darted across her mind, or a sudden doubt lest she had gone too far? She stopped abruptly.

A winning smile spread over the Marquis's face as he took her hands in his, preparatory to a fresh start.

"I will tell him that—not when it is too late for either of you—but while there is time for you both to be as happy as possible. Only let me find him, and I'll tell him at once."

"You are my best friend," she said, looking up at him with a glow of gratitude in her large eyes, her heart swelling with new hope, though she told herself it was folly.

"That is better than a Victoria Cross," he said joyfully, as he bent his head and kissed her hands, deferentially, his young heart going out to her on a wave of compassion, as he thought of her longing for a man who never came, and wondered if Sartoris were mad!

"You are too tired," he said, as they started, and he felt she wavered uncertainly. "Tell you what. I'll fetch one of those small sleighs, and take you back without any exertion on your part. Wait for a minute on this stump."

He led her back most carefully to the bank, deposited her on the ivied roots of what had once been a gigantic oak, then hurried away as fast as he could, in order not to keep her waiting.

The drooping branches of a willow cut her off from sight of the constantly moving crowd, and from all the glory of the western sky. A great gloom came over her in the silence and solitude, and she began to wish that she had persevered, and not allowed herself to be left there all alone. As the shadows deepened a vague feeling of fear crept over her, which changed into active disgust as a man came swiftly round the willow, and she saw it was Ralph Armitage.

He took off his hat, and scrambled to the bank, with a look of intense eagerness in his eyes.

"At last!" he said, his pale cheeks flushing, his breast heaving. Now as he looked at the beauty which had led him so wildly astray a fierce exultation came over him, and for the first time since he had done the awful deed he was glad, positively glad, that Jack Sartoris lay cold and still under the waves of the Crannock, because now he could love his widow without scruple, and win her for himself without dishonour.

He sat down at her feet, in spite of the snow on the bank, and looked up into her face with his eyes all on fire.

"You are always out when I call! You avoided me at the Duchess's dance, but at last I have my chance. Mrs. Sartoris, have you forgotten?"

"I don't know to what you allude!" looking away from him across the cold, grey ice. "Did you see Lord Belfeather anywhere? He promised to fetch me in a sleigh."

"I did see Lord Belfeather, and I blessed the old woman who hooked herself on to him, and so prevented him from coming back. Have you forgotten your promise? I have thought of nothing else, night and day."

"What promise?"

"You know very well. You made it when the storm was at its worst, and you thought death might be near us. A promise like that is never forgotten."

"But I have been ill," a troubled look coming over her face; "you can't expect me to remember."

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"I know you haven't forgotten," his voice throbbing with passion. "You couldn't forget if you tried; but if your memory is bad I can remind you," leaning forward. "It was about St. John, you know," he could not help catch in his breath as the name of the murdered man passed his lips. "You promised that if I saw him, and if he refused to come back, you would be my wife."

She shrank back from him, her eyes wide open, an expression of horror on her parted lips.

"I never did—impossible!" Oh, where was Lord Belfeather! She wished to Heaven he would come. The silence seemed to deepen in the



momentary pause, and not a sound came from either far or near.

"You did—I swear it!" a gleam of triumph in his eyes. "If you were free, you promised on your honour."

"You must be mad. Do you forget that I have a husband? I was half mad myself that night, but not crazed enough for that."

"The report had come that he was dead."

"And you traded on it at once!"

"I had been pining for your freedom, and when it came neither heaven nor hell could have kept me silent."

"Thank Heaven, it has not come," starting to her feet, "and I have still a husband living to protect me from your pursuit."

"But if he dies, no matter where or how, remember, you belong to me," his voice harsh as a raven's.

"Never—never!" in great agitation.

At that moment Lord Balfather whirled round the corner, and placed a dainty little sleigh before her.

In her eagerness to get into it she nearly fell; but he caught her in his arms, and saved her.

"Oh! why didn't you come before!" she said, in a tone of such regret that he cast a sharp glance at Armitage, whom he did not recognise in the shadow.

"Has anyone annoyed you?" he asked, quickly. "I couldn't get here before—I flew as soon as I was free."

"Take me away, that's all," she said, hurriedly, and he obeyed; but when they were far from the corner, and within a short distance of the group round the fire, he bent over her, and said, in a low but eager voice,—

"Who was that fellow? Tell me, and I'll go and have it out with him!"

"No, let him be; only if he dines here to-night I will keep to my room," her voice still trembling.

"Then he won't put his foot inside the house; that I can promise you. It was Armitage, wasn't it? He must have come with the De la Tour, but I take my oath he shan't come again!"

(To be continued.)

FACETIAE.

FIRST POOR MAN (born poor): "It takes money to make money." SECOND POOR MAN (born rich): "Yes, and it takes money to lose money."

FRIEND: "Does your town boast of a football team?" SUBURBANITE: "No; we used to boast of one, but we have to apologise for it now."

AMY: "A man should always wait for a lady to sit down before seating himself." CHARLEY: "Unless there is only one chair in the room."

CHRISTMAS comes but once a year," observed Mrs. Cumeo. "I think that the country's financial salvation lies in that happy fact," replied Mr. Cumeo.

"MUST I tell you once more to stop that noise!" asked the mother. "I'd just as lief you wouldn't, mother," replied the supernaturally bright boy.

TENANT: "I think, sir, something ought to be done to my cellar. It's constantly full of water." LANDLORD: "At a pound a week rent, would you expect it to be full of champagne?"

"Is that performer familiar with your music?" was asked of a composer at the concert. "He must be," replied the composer, who was writhing; "he takes such liberties with it."

LITTLE HORTENSE (proudly): "My aunt, over in England, has a memorial bearing." LITTLE ROBERT: "Huh! I don't care. My uncle down in Indiana has a chicken with three legs!"

"WHY should they tell us there is a Santa Claus if there isn't?" asked the amiable boy. "That's easy enough," answered the urchin. "Parents want somebody to lay the blame on if you don't get the kind of presents you want."

"HERE, young man," said the old lady, with fire in her eye; "I've brung back this thermometer you sold me." "What's the matter with it?" asked the shopman. "It ain't reliable. One time ye look at it it says one thing, and the next time it says another."

TOOKER: "Do you know, I'm quite a believer in the theory that we have all lived before in some other shape." LOCKER (who has just paid for the ninth drink): "Ah, very likely." TOOKER: "Wonder what I was in my former life!" LOCKER: "Dunno. Sponge, probably."

"A POET has said that there are songs in the silence," remarked the young man who carries a music-roll. "Yes," answered Mr. Bykins; "the trouble is that so many people refuse to let well enough alone and insist on dragging 'em out."

THE GUIDE: "This here spot is known as 'Lovers' Leap.'" THE FAIR TOURIST (astounded): "What an unpicturesque spot! Why in the world did you give it such a romantic name?" "Cause yer can't sit here five minutes before a caterpillar drops down yer neck!"

KERRIGAN: "Do yer believe in dhramas, Riley?" RILEY: "Oh do." "That's it a soign ov when a married man dhramas he's a bachelor an' klesin' a jewel ov a girl under the mistletoe!" "It's a soign that he's going to mate with a great disappointment—when he wakes."

ANGRY M.P.: "Look here! I've half a mind to sue you for libel! What do you mean by picturing me as you have!" CARICONIST: "But the picture looks like you." ANGRY M.P.: "I know it does! I know it does! But do I look like a man who likes to look like himself!"

SEN: "You are always talking about the fashions. Now, honestly, do you think you would know the latest fashion in hats if you were to enter a milliner's?" HE: "Certainly." SHE: "How!" HE (ruefully): "By looking at the prices."

"DISCHARGE the stage manager!" shouted the theatre proprietor. "What has he done?" "He has disregarded the first principles of his art. He has permitted the low comedian to appear without a red wig, and let the man who plays the banker come on without side whiskers!"

"REMEMBER, my boy," said Uncle James, as he gave Bobby a coin, "that if you take care of the pennies the pounds will take care of themselves." Bobby looked a little dubious. "I do take care of the pennies," he replied, "but as soon as they get to be pounds pa takes care of 'em."

LAWYER: "You say you made an examination of the premises. What did you find?" WITNESS: "Oh, nothing of consequence—a beggarly account of empty boxes," as Shakespeare says. LAWYER: "Never mind what Shakespeare said. He will be summoned to testify for himself, if he knows anything about the case."

ACKERS: "Well, how am I to-day, doctor?" DR. HEALEY: "You are doing very well; very well indeed. You may sit up for awhile to-day." ACKERS: "Thank you, doctor; that is good news. By the way, may I inquire what your bill is?" DR. HEALEY: "Presently, presently! You are not so strong as you think."

JONES: "What a lucky fellow you are, Brown! You always seem to catch your train with such ease. You never rush up at the last moment like most of us." BROWN: "You're making a mistake, my dear fellow. My misfortune is really worse. I never catch my proper train. You always see me waiting patiently for the next."

MRS. COMEBACK was bemoaning the loss of a beautiful little silk purse, which had recently been presented to her by a friend. "I tell you, Algernon," she wailed piteously, "it was the dearest little thing I ever saw. A perfect beauty—a regular little jewel!—in short, it was a poem in itself, and, although it contained only a few stamps—" "Never mind, my dear," said Mr. Comeback in a reassuring tone; "if it was a poem and was accompanied by stamps, it will doubtless be returned in due time."

"CHARLES," said Mrs. Spendall, "I saw a beautiful costume at Bissarro's to-day, and I should like it ever so much!" "And I should like you to have it," replied Charles. "But really, Clara, I haven't the money to spare." "Oh, you great tease! I know better than that. I saw a brand-new cheque-book in your desk only yesterday, and not one of the cheques had been used."

At an evening party Damley was introduced to a young lady, and, after a remark about the weather, he said, gallantly: "And have I really the pleasure of meeting the beautiful Miss Smith?" "Oh, no, Mr. Damley!" the lady replied. "The beautiful Miss Smith to whom you refer is a cousin of mine." "Oh, that's it! Well, I thought there must be a mistake somewhere," said gallant Damley.

A YOUNG subaltern in a smart regiment, who had no means but his pay, and had, therefore, to content himself with small quarters, was one day called upon by a brother officer. "Hallo, old man!" said he, looking round his apartment, "how long have you been in this diminutive nutshell?" "My dear fellow," replied the other, "I am sorry to say not quite long enough to become a kernel!"

BARONESS: "Clara, bring me those dozen pocket-handkerchiefs on which I told you to mark my monogram." LADY'S MAID: "Here they are, my lady." BARONESS: "But how is this! You haven't marked all of them with my monogram." LADY'S MAID: "Indeed I have, my lady. I marked one with your monogram, and I have marked all the others with the word 'ditto'."

FARMER GREENE: "So the teacher said you were a chip of the old block, eh! The impudent virago! What had you been doing?" BOBBY GREENE: "Why, I had been standing at the head of my class in everything, and—" FATHER GREENE: "Just as I thought, my boy! Miss Jones is a most estimable and discerning young lady, and I shall recommend her to the trustees for a raise of salary."

"I SUPPOSE you read my poem," said he. "I read the first line," answered Miss Cayenne. "It set me thinking so deeply that I couldn't go on. I know it by heart—The sun was setting in the west." "But that isn't the best thing in the poem." "Perhaps not; but it is absolutely mysterious. I have been anxious to meet you and inquire whether you ever knew of a case where the sun set in the north, east or south."

"YES," remarked the hospital physician to his wife that evening. "It was a horrible case. The man was perfectly unrecognisable, and there was not the slightest clue to his identification. All we could tell was that he was a married man." "How could you tell that?" she asked. "He had no buttons on his shirt, and his braces were mended with a safety-pin."—Whereupon she immediately found the "A B C" and went by the next train to "mother."

"HE asked me to marry him." "And you accepted him?" "No. Idiot that I was, I asked for time." "And what did he say?" "He said he'd give me a year." "Ah! And what did you say?" "I saw my mistake. I said two days would be plenty. But he wouldn't hear it. He said no woman could make up her mind in such a short time. He really insisted on my taking six months. We finally compromised on thirty days." "And then?" "He married that puffy-faced Bimberling girl the very next week."

FIRST MAN: "Pardon me, sir, but I think you are carrying my umbrella. I could swear to that ivory handle anywhere. If I had not recognised it instantly, I should not have presumed to stop you. That carving was done—" SECOND MAN: "Spare me the details, please! It is altogether probable that this is your property. I have no particular claim upon it." "Then how did it come to be in your possession?" "It was left in my hall last night by a burglar who got away with most of the family silver." "I—I guess my umbrella was a size larger than that, after all."

SOCIETY.

THE greatest uncertainty prevails in Nice as regards the prospects of the Queen visiting Orléans next year, and the fact that M. Doreé, Her Majesty's courier, has been to Bordighera, has considerably lessened the confidence of the townspeople in the return of the Queen, which, despite all statements to the contrary, they would warmly welcome.

THE marriage of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands to Duke Heinrich of Mecklenburg-Schwerin is to be a comparatively quiet ceremony, as the Queen wishes to have only near relations at the marriage. Naturally the various European Courts will be represented, but, in order to avoid possible complications, the Queen has very sensibly declared that she does not wish the ceremony to be more public than is absolutely necessary.

PRINCESS LOUISE, DUCHESS OF ARGYLL, who has inherited her father's talent for modelling and sculpture, has almost finished another statue of the Queen. This work is to be placed over the new western porch of the Manchester Cathedral. Her Royal Highness gives the statue as a remembrance of the time when her husband, then Marquis of Lorne, was member for South Manchester.

ALTHOUGH he is unable to venture so far as Australia, the Prince has informed the Lord Mayor of Belfast that he will visit that city in the company of the Princess towards the end of April next. This announcement, coming so soon after Her Majesty the Queen's memorable visit to Ireland, has created a feeling of profound satisfaction throughout the Emerald Isle. It is fifteen years since the Prince and Princess last visited Ireland, and on that occasion they made a tour of twenty days' duration, visiting Dublin, Cork, Killarney, Belfast and Derry.

QUEEN WILHELMINA'S wedding-dress has at length been placed in hand. It is customary for the manufacturer who supplies the fabric for such important events to do his utmost that the stuff may be unlike anything ever woven before; but it is not possible to make much variety in silver brocade, although in this case the texture is singularly soft and beautiful, and falls almost as gracefully as silk. The skirt is cut in tunic form in front over flounces of exquisite lace. The tunic is embroidered round the edge with an appropriate design of orange blossoms and leaves, but the fruit predominates, as Queen Wilhelmina's desire, as it is the emblem of the House of Orange-Nassau. The work is carried out in bright and dull silver, intermingled with *pailettes* of various sizes. The border on the Court train is of similar design, but is deeper and heavier in effect, while the corsage merely has sufficient embroidery upon it to render it a match to the skirt, as the chief decoration will be lace, real orange flowers, and, of course, magnificent jewellery, as well as the Order of Orange-Nassau. The corsage will be entirely made in Paris, and the skirt and train will be returned thither as speedily as possible for completion, when once the embroidery is ready.

PRINCESS MARGARET OF CONNAUGHT is the eldest of the Duke and Duchess of Connaught's children. She was eighteen this month, and is one of the most charming and accomplished of European marriageable Princesses. Notwithstanding her youth, the question of her marriage has already been more than once discussed, and last autumn her engagement to the Czarevitch, the Tsar of Russia's only brother, was widely rumoured on the Continent. Although Princess Margaret is four years older than her only sister, Princess Victoria Patricia, the two Princesses are never happier than when together, and lately they have been seeing something of the humorous side of Irish life by paying an *incognito* visit to Clones Fair. The Duchess of Connaught has very original ideas concerning the education of girls. Her daughters have been brought up very simply; they have not a trace of shyness, and have already won golden opinions in the neighbourhood of Castleblayney, where Princess Margaret is known as "The Fairy Princess."

STATISTICS.

GREAT BRITAIN brews £69,000,000 worth of beer a year.

THE oak will not grow at a higher altitude than 3,500 feet, nor the fir above 6,700.

EUROPE lies on an average 1,000 ft. above the sea; Africa, 2,020; and Asia, 3,160.

IN England there is one M.P. to every 9,100 electors; in Scotland, 1 to 8,000; in Ireland, 1 to 7,400.

THE Caspian Sea has only 11 lbs. of salt to the ton of water; the English Channel has 72, and the Dead Sea 187.

GEMS.

LET each man make himself as he teaches others to be. He who is well subdued may subdue others.

THERE are two things in which we should thoroughly train ourselves—to be slow in taking offence, and to be slower in giving it.

IT is curious how a conviction tends to become deep and strong by reason of the fact that it is entertained. It seems to possess the power of the seed to send out shoots and become rooted in the mind, and ultimately to yield its fruit. Indeed, except for these rare natures that have the power on the instant of coming to the firmest decision, the element of time is an important factor in the strength of our convictions.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

CREAM PANCAKES.—Take a pint of cream, boil it, and let it stand till cold; then take five eggs, one spoonful of flour, and the grated rind of a lemon. Mix all together; fry them as thin as possible, but do not burn them. Sift sugar between each pancake, and lay them one on the top of the other.

POTATO CHEESE CAKES.—For these you need a bit of paste, 6 oz. of potato, 2 oz. butter, 4 oz. sugar, 4 oz. currants, 1 oz. candied peel, one egg and a pinch of salt. Six ounces of potatoes; after they are boiled nicely you will find it will be about three; but it is better to weigh them; then mash them up with a fork. The potatoes must be very well boiled and steamed. When mashed add the butter and mix it, then the sugar, then the currants and the peel cut up in very small bits. Last of all stir in the egg, well beaten. Now take a bit of paste, just the same as made in last recipe. Roll it out quite thin, and cut with a round cutter or top of a tumbler. Grease some small patty-pans and fill in the paste on each. Then put the mixture on to fill the pan, till it is all used up. Put it in the oven to bake about twenty minutes. These cakes are good, and turn out well.

FINGER SOUFFLÉ.—Two ounces of butter in a pan, then add three ounces of flour, which has first been dried and sieved, and half a pint of milk. Mix these well together into what is called a *panada*, and let it boil; then add to it one tea-spoonful of syrup from a jar of preserved ginger. Cook the mixture well over the fire; then add one by one the yolks of three eggs, three ounces of castor sugar, and three ounces of preserved ginger, cut up into small dice. Whip the whites of four eggs into a very stiff froth, then stir it lightly into the mixture. Have ready a soufflé mould—it should be first thoroughly greased—then tie neatly round a piece of buttered paper, which should come about four inches above the top. Pour in the mixture, cover it lightly with a piece of greased paper, and steam gently for one and a half hours. For the first ten or twelve minutes be careful not to uncover the saucepan. Turn it out, and serve with ginger syrup poured round.

MISCELLANEOUS.

RICE has been successfully grown near Windsor. NEWSPAPER advertisements made their earliest appearance in 1652.

ENGLAND'S first tramway was made in 1860, at Birkenhead, by George Francis Train.

ON Christmas Day in America shops are usually open for two hours in the morning.

THE Danube Navigation Company carries 1,300,000 passengers a year—a world's record.

LONDON people spend on an average 7s. a year in theatre-tickets.

COMIC pantomime masks were brought to England from Italy in 1702.

AN ounce of gold was worth 15 ounces of silver in the year 1880. It would buy 21 ounces in 1900.

IN 1870, 80 words a minute was the record over our telegraph-wire; 600 are easily sent to-day.

THE postal revenues of Great Britain, Germany, and of the United States all vary between £11,000,000 and £12,000,000.

THE first catalogue of stars was published in 1590 by Tycho Brahe. It contained 777 fixed stars. The number now visible to the naked eye in England is 6,100.

IF every man capable of bearing arms were put into the field, Britain's Army would be 9,900,000, against 11,000,000 Frenchmen or 12,500,000 Germans.

THE future movements of the Tsar are somewhat uncertain, for the report that he would visit Sicily or Corfu has now been contradicted and it is semi-officially stated that his Majesty will remain in Russia.

A MOVEMENT has been started in France which has for its purpose the preservation, or, rather, the cultivation of the kangaroo, which has been rapidly proceeding towards extermination. Dr. Brisson, a French surgeon, says that there is likely soon to be an exceptional demand for the animals in consequence of the success attending the use of the kangaroo tendon in the hospitals. It has been employed in scores of instances to tie up the fractured bones of a man's leg, in order that he may use his knees while the bones are knitting together. Kangaroo tendon, he says, is as strong as silver wire. It is taken from the tail, and being animal in its nature is absorbed, and the leg does not have to be cut open, as is necessary when silver wire is used.

ALMOST all popular symbols of "luck" date back to some laughable event or custom in the mystic East. The notion with regard to the horse-shoe is sometimes supposed to be traceable to popular admiration for the famous mare on which Mahomet always rode; but as Arab horses in the desert—that is to say, practically in a state of Nature—are never shod, there is some uncertainty about it. Far more likely is it that the horse-shoe suggests a crescent, which was part of the insignia of Antarte, or Ashtoroth, the moon-goddess, and to this very day the symbol of the Ottoman Empire. The superstition that it is unlucky to see the moon over the left shoulder, but so lucky to see it over the right shoulder, is the relic of an invocation, or perhaps a genuflection, practised by the moon-worshippers thousands of years ago. Hardly anyone, unless it be a gardener, ever thinks of killing a spider. We shake them off, but rarely take their lives, especially in the case of a small one, called a money-spinner. It is supposed that the individual on whose dress or person the little creature is seen will speedily have an abundance of coin. An old rhyme says—"Who kills a spider, bad luck is beside her." This is probably of Arabian origin. Mahomet, pursued by his enemies, one day took refuge in a cave, and no sooner was he hidden than a spider proceeded to spin a web over its mouth. His foes passed by the entrance to that cavern, observing to one another that nobody had recently gone in, or the web would have been broken. Consequently, all true believers venerate the spider.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

FATZ.—You can do exactly as you like.

D. A. G.—You must give a quarter's notice.

E. C.—France is the second great naval Power.

C. F.—We do not advise on questions of this kind.

L. G.—The name is locally pronounced Kirkoobrie.

H. B.—It is against our rule to give trade addresses.

L. G.—You can be either; it rests entirely with yourself.

L. E. B.—Write to the publisher enclosing postage stamps.

OBVIOUS.—Hanging up the stocking is a Scandinavian custom.

OLD READER.—You must have your name lightly painted on it.

L. L.—No stamp of any kind is necessary upon a will to make it legal.

JOE.—A man can have a vote as tenant or as lodger, but not as sub-tenant.

REGULAR READER.—The husband is responsible for his wife's maintenance.

ELLA.—Bull the milk; do not throw it away, then it can be used with safety.

POWELL.—A blind ditch is a ditch without water, and choked with weeds.

EMILY.—We can only suggest it should be well-dried, then beaten and brushed.

ARISTOCR.—It is doubtful if she would succeed if you can produce such evidence.

POSITIVE.—There was an attempt to form such a society, but it fell through.

EDITH.—If scrubbing-brushes are stood on end to dry they will last much longer.

A. C.—There is nothing to prevent a son being apprenticed to his own father.

S. B.—You are entitled to a month's wages from the time of the notice, if accepted.

INTERESTED.—The Queen has power to declare war without consulting Parliament.

H. B.—The son gets two-thirds of the money; the remaining third is your portion.

L. A.—Call at a shipping office and ask advice, or consult your clergyman or minister.

ARISTOCR.—A father cannot legally be made to pay price of window broken by his child.

HILARY.—Embroidery should always be ironed on the wrong side to bring out the design.

INDIGNANT.—Whoever you got it from would be the proper person to rectify what is wrong.

VERA.—The C.I.V.'s were made freemen of the City of London before they left for South Africa.

I. B.—These cases are regulated altogether by the rules of the society, not by the statute law.

A. L.—We cannot judge of the rights of the matter from the meagre information which you give.

A. P.—You should have stipulated that the rent was not to commence until the house was habitable.

ANXIOUS MOTHER.—Unless the mischief was done wilfully or recklessly the boy would not be liable.

C. G.—Cavalrymen cannot be transferred to infantry regiment except under exceptional circumstances.

JEMIE.—Oatmeal taken both as food and cosmetic is most excellent for whitening and softening the skin.

HAROLD.—The estate should be distributed six months after death if no special difficulty in arranging things.

CARL.—The rite must be performed before the individual can be admitted to the membership of the Church.

A. B.—If the promise was made in England it is doubtful whether any action could be taken as you suggest.

ARTIE.—He is the bridegroom's right-hand man throughout, pays the fee and superintends all the arrangements.

S. B.—Quite impossible to find your friend without first knowing the name under which he is entered upon the ship's books.

SAMMY.—We cannot very well decide who should yield to the other in a quarrel without knowing what the quarrel is about.

INDIGNANT.—If you have proof that he promised to marry you, made to friends or acquaintances, you might have cause for action.

ANT.—When the mud is thoroughly dry brush the loose particles away, and remove the stains that remain by rubbing with a raw potato.

JIM.—Write to managers stating what you can do; the application may reach one of them when he is on the look-out for a likely hand.

MISERABLE.—The parish will not move until you and children go into the house; they have then a claim against the man for your maintenance.

L. D.—A man's whole wages, or in default the man himself, can be arrested for taxes; if he is taken and gets six weeks in jail that extinguishes the debt.

SUFFERER.—Take equal portions of mercurial and galbanum ointments; mix well, spread on a bit of leather, and apply to the corns morning and evening.

A. M.—Write in the first place to Agent-General for New South Wales, Victoria-street, London, S.W.; he will give reference to most likely official in colony.

G. S.—Although you pay your rent quarterly, you must, in the absence of any special agreement to the contrary, give six months' notice to quit.

MILLY.—The grain is all the better for being twice washed clean before being used, and should be put into broth pot when the water is boiling.

ALBERTO.—It is more a distinction than anything else, but there are privileges attached—educational, parochial, and various miscellaneous charities.

PERCIVAL.—It is probable that it would be much cheaper to purchase one ready made. Of course you know that the instrument you mention has been patented.

G. B. E.—The custom, is for the wife's sister, when she has one, to act as bridesmaid; it is usual, too, though not so customary, for the bridegroom's brother to be his best man.

J. L.—A marriage contracted between parties according to the laws of any civilised country is binding in the United Kingdom, whether the parties are citizens of this country or foreigners.

L. W.—It is not necessary to employ a solicitor to draw up a will, though it is safer to do so when much property is at stake. Forms of will are given in many diaries, and may be purchased at any law stationers.

BAITSMEN.—There is no source from which you could obtain the money necessary to take you and family to the Transvaal, and that is fortunate, because there is really no room for working men there just now.

OPTIMISM.

WHEN worried with troubles, with dangers you cope,
And the skies are all lowering and grey,
Don't stay in the low grounds of sorrow, and mope,
But fly to the hills of re-joicing, and hope
For the dawn of a kinder day.

Oh, do not despond, neither faint in the race,
Heaven portions to all of mankind!
Then labour and plan for the best in your case,
Reduce your expenses, with bright, smiling face,
Be light-hearted and tranquil in mind.

If harassed by debt, do not loiter round so!
Keep plodding along with a smile.
The tide of success will overtake you, and lo!
The gates of good fortune will merrily blow,
And your ship will come after a while.

Your ship will come sailing from over the sea,
Lightly borne over rocks of despair;
The beacon of cheerfulness brings it to thee,
'Tis wafted o'er waves with contentment and glee,
Richly laden with treasures most rare.

UNCOMFORT.—If no doubt requires a good deal of mixing, as directed, in the making, and should be mixed by agitation before using every time it is applied.

W. B.—Perhaps you have it in too odd or draughty a place, or it may have worked too quickly; if a very small quantity has been made that will sometimes occur. It is only the person who watches over the process on the spot who can possibly regulate all the little but essential matters that result in success.

OLD READER.—The rust may be removed by rubbing them lengthwise with a piece of shamoos leather, having crocus powder or emery flour spread on it, and then carefully removing every particle of powder with a clean leather, which should be frequently shaken out.

KATIE.—Cleanse thoroughly with warm water and washing soda, wash off with clean water, and when dry polish with putty powder or with rottenstone, but much of what is called "marble" is a made-up composition or slate. These will sometimes polish well, but not always.

E. M.—Throw some powdered brimstone on the fire in the grate, and then put a board or something in front of the fireplace to prevent the fumes descending into the room. The vapour from the brimstone ascending the chimney will effectually extinguish the soot on fire.

KITTY.—The only effective way of securing and retaining a beautiful complexion is by attending to the simple laws of health. Eat plain and substantial food, avoid pastry and greasy compounds, take plenty of outdoor exercise, retire and arise early, and associate with amiable and cheerful people.

CLARENCE.—Unless the fur is very dirty, it can generally be cleaned by rubbing thoroughly with dry flour, which must be shaken and brushed out after it has been well rubbed in. Some people prefer to use bran which has been damped with cold water, and afterwards to rub with warmed bran. After rubbing with the damp bran the fur should be rubbed till quite dry before the warm bran is applied.

EVEL.—As you have no housework to do, it ought to be a simple matter to keep your hands white and soft. Try using glycerine and lemon-juice for a short time; and if they get rough, apply glycerine at night before going to bed and sleep in gloves. With a little care they will soon assume a good colour.

POVERTY STRICKEN.—Ink and olive oil mixed in equal proportions, painted on the glove with feather or soft brush, and then allowed to dry, will improve shabby kid gloves immensely. Sober ones may also be treated in the same way. Remember to use as little of the mixture as possible, or you will do more harm than good.

VERONICA.—A girl of your age cannot be too careful; you should tell the whole business to your parents at once. It was extremely naïve to accept any presents from the young man, and they should certainly be returned. But before you take any further steps in the matter you should confide in your parents, that they may deal with the case. He will not trouble you when once you have the protection of your people.

ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—A carrot contains pepsic acid, which aids digestion and which accounts for its popularity as a complexion beautifier. Carrots and green peas have long been included in the vegetable menu, but now the carrot is cooked in cream, combined with string beans, stewed with salt pork, mashed, baked, pickled, made into soup and salad, and even used for peeding by bleeding with breadcrumbs, eggs, raisins, sugar, milk and nutmeg.

R. T.—Ordinary civility demands that some acknowledgment of the attentions bestowed upon a guest should be made on the departure of that guest, but that does not at all obviate the necessity of writing after one's arrival at home, and expressing some of the pleasure derived from the visit. Such ordinary little courtesies of life should be looked upon as a pleasure rather than as a trouble; it is the very least one can do after all the trouble that is necessarily occasioned by the entertaining for some days or weeks of a visitor.

GLADYS.—We think you have both decided very sensibly in postponing the wedding. Under the circumstances it would be folly to marry immediately. We see no reason for such despatch as you seem to be suffering from. You and your lover have many compensations, and there seems no reason that the postponement should be for long. You are both young, and have plenty of time before you in the ordinary course of events. Meantime, you are able to make the best of your days of courtship, which are generally supposed to be the happiest days of one's life.

AMBITIOUS.—A good memory is certainly an essential, but if this is the only qualification you can put forth for the stage, the sooner your retire from the ranks of the aspirants to fame in that profession the better. However, the best way to convince you of the many essentials to become an actor would be for you to go in the usual way to a theatrical manager, state your requirements and your qualifications, and see what he has to say to you on the point, if indeed, you are lucky enough to obtain a hearing of a theatrical manager, which is very doubtful.

S. R.—Sir Robert Peel was Premier and the Duke of Wellington Foreign Secretary when the Queen came to the throne; those two ministers carried the news of her uncle's death to the Princess Victoria in the middle of the night, and Wellington has left on record the deep impression which the discreet and amiable attitude of his future Queen made upon him when summoned to unceremoniously before them at such an unseasonable hour; there have been twenty-two Premiers or Administrations since then; you will find a full record of them with their dates in "Whitaker's Almanack," which can be seen at our office if necessary.

H. H.—It is a very unwise proceeding always to sacrifice one's happiness to what one imagines to be one's dignity. In the present circumstances you do not appear to have good grounds for the assumption that your lover is false. The very fact that he has always been so punctual in his correspondence and regular should rather give you cause for uneasiness than indignation. You might at least write to his friends and ascertain if they have any news of him, and if they are as much in the dark as you, we should be inclined to think that there is something wrong, that perhaps the young man is ill and unable to let you know of his condition.

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